

THE DEATH OF A
WORLD

NOVELS BY ROMAIN ROLLAND

CLERAMBAULT

COLAS BREUGNON, BURGUNDIAN

JEAN-CHRISTOPHE

Dawn
Morning
Youth
Revolt

JEAN-CHRISTOPHE IN PARIS

In the Market Place
Antoinette
The House

JEAN-CHRISTOPHE

Journey's End
Love and Friendship
The Burning Bush
The New Dawn

PIERRE AND LUCE

THE SOUL ENCHANTED

- I. Annette and Sylvie
- II. Summer
- III. Mother and Son
- IV. The Death of a World

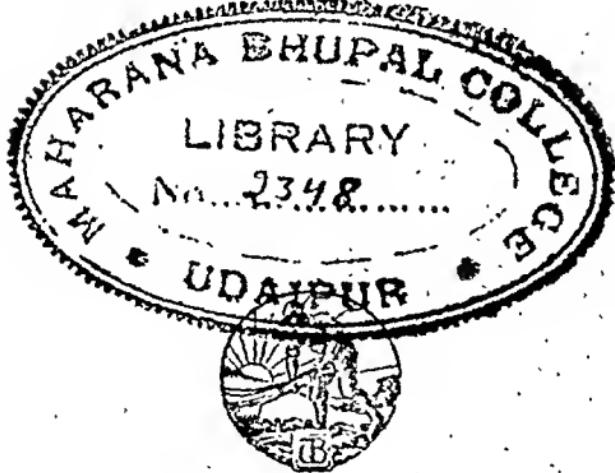
THE DEATH OF A WORLD

*Being Volume Four of
The Soul Enchanted*

By
ROMAIN ROLLAND

Translated from the French by

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The Death of a World is the fourth volume of a work that bears the title *The Soul Enchanted*. The first volume is entitled *Annette and Sylvie*, the second *Summer* and the third *Mother and Son*. The story continues from the closing pages of *Mother and Son*, on Armistice Day, 11th November, 1918, in Annette Rivière's flat.

This is a work of fiction, and all characters in the book are drawn from the author's imagination. If any names or titles belonging to living persons have been used, this has been done inadvertently and no reference to such person or persons is intended.

PART THE FIRST
THE SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

I

THEY had been obliged to close the window on to the balcony. The surging crowd in the street was swelling like a rising tide. Gusts of tempest swept over it. Howls, piercing shrieks, strident laughter. In the intervals of silence, could be heard the trampling of the huge invisible mass. The beast was taking breath. Then it gave vent to a bull-like roar.

Sylvie could not stand it. Her nostrils quivered. She made off, trying to drag her nephew with her. It was impossible, she said, to shut oneself up on such a day ; let people think what they liked, one must see and enjoy it. (When Sylvie enjoyed anything it was never by halves.) But Marc refused to go with her, refused the more angrily for the fear and longing under his contempt. He spent the whole afternoon shut up with his mother in the flat, where the November dusk gathered early. The din outside grew louder hour by hour. Marc sat on his bed biting the back of his hands. Annette tried to keep her thoughts and fingers busy ; in the corner of the room farthest from the window she sat sewing by the light of the lamp. But seeing her son's discomfiture, she threw her work aside, and went and sat beside him on the bed. She took his hand and he did not draw it away, but he kept his face obstinately turned to the wall.

She looked at him with a compassionate smile, kissed the youthful neck below the ear, and whispered :

“ Go out, my dear ! ”

He shook his head violently.

“ No ! ”

But, at night, after his mother had prepared the frugal meal, during which they talked of nothing in particular, Marc remembered that he had to take an urgent answer for the next day. Annette listened to his footsteps going downstairs, she was not free from fear, but she thought : “ Better to go out and be

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sorry that he did not stay here, than to stay and be sorry that he did not go out." She went back to her seat under the lamp, the ironical ghost of her wise smile hovering about her lips : " Perhaps the worst sin is the one we want to commit, and do not. . . ."

II

Marc had not gone three steps outside the door when he was caught in the whirlpool. He had intended to cross the road to the other side of the boulevard. In an instant he was rolled, bowled, and flung from one to the other of the two conflicting streams. Before he realized it, he found himself swept fifty yards lower down in the opposite direction. Carried along, ground and squeezed against a mass of bellowing bodies, he had the sensation of being stripped, rolled out, and kneaded into the human paste which stretched from one end of the avenue to the other. He freed himself by a furious play of elbows, hips, and knees, only to be caught in the opposing stream and flung against a group of excited women, pushing madly, and screaming with pleasure and fright under brutal shoving. One of them, fair and thin, with swimming eyes, her mouth wide open (one could see to the root of her tongue), held tightly behind by a youth who was pulling her about, threw herself on Marc and devoured his mouth with a slobbery kiss. The boy's blood flared up ; he seized another passing female, and wiped his lips on hers ; and so, alternately embracing and embraced, he passed from arm to arm, a young hunting male, gone mad, pillaging every woman he met. And of one mind with the delirious crowd howling *La Madelon*, he said to himself :

" It is Peace. It is *my* Peace. This is my share of the spoil."

As he knew better, he lied to himself all the more :

" *My kiss to the whole world !*"

But things would not have gone well if the world had refused it ! He came up against another male, a tall fellow, who

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dragged him away from the lips he was rifling. He was not very keen on it, before ; he was grimly set on it, after. A blow under the chin sent him reeling and giddy into the human waves which opened at the shock, and separated him from the man who had left the taste of his fist on his teeth. Marc struggled in vain to catch up with him. The burning hate within him cried out for some revenge. He must have it on the spot, or burst ! Instantly chance offered him a most cowardly revenge. He seized it without hesitation.

A young girl was struggling within a few feet of him. He saw at a glance that she was a little provincial bourgeoisie, who, on leaving her hotel, must have lost her way in the streets, fallen into the torrent and got drowned in it. She had a round, simple, terrified face ; she was trying to escape from the flood by a side-street, and the flood was making fun of her. She was helpless against filthy liberties, and her stupefied eyes called for help. Marc pounced upon her like a young hawk. The furrow he made in the crowd as he swooped upon the prey, set the partridge free ; she fled up a steep side-street, dark and narrow. He rushed after her and seized her round the hips. He felt the soft body quivering in his clutch, and crushed her back against him between his arms and legs. She was ready to drop, her knees were giving way ; with her neck sunk timidously between her shoulders, she bent her head, half dead with fright. By the light from a ground-floor window, Marc saw the frail white neck, and bit it. The victim moaned, burying her face in her hands. He dragged the clinging fingers (one had come through the worn glove), from her face, turned back her head, lifted her chin, and pounced brutally upon her mouth. In that moment he saw her suppliant eyes, and they pierced his heart like a lance, but not before he had planted his avid kiss between the youthful lips, and left his mark upon them. He felt the blood on his tongue ; and at the same moment, the shock of her eyes on his. He started, and released the prey, and she, freed from his clutch, sank down. She had fallen on her knees before him, her face hidden in her arms, unable to

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scream, motionless, helpless, with no strength left but to keep herself from seeing. The street was deserted. A bend in the houses hid the boulevard, whose rumbling torrent, like those electric projectors which make the darkness blacker around their circle of light, piled up the silence in the recess in which dog and game paused—a couple of children. Marc cast a troubled glance on the girl at his feet, and without a thought of helping her up, he turned and fled.

He lost himself in a labyrinth of streets on the sides of the Montagne Ste Genviève, coming suddenly at some sharp turning upon the gurgling of Victory in her cups, and drawing back like a swimming rat escaping from the main sewer. At last, he managed to reach the staircase of his house, now plunged in darkness. In the dark passage of the flat, on the fifth floor, a gleam of light filtered under the door of his mother's room. He slipped into bed, without a light. Naked between the icy sheets, in the dark, he found his buffeted soul again ; it seized him by the throat crying :

“ What have you done to me ? ”

For he was still thinking only of himself and not of the other. Face downwards on his bed, he buried his mouth in the pillow. Then he saw himself in the place and in the person of his victim. The soft neck, the outraged body of the little girl, the violation—And of the two he was himself the more defiled. So, after all his fine words, after the lofty pride of his conversations with his mother, after his professions of chivalrous faith, lashing the wolves and foxes of the Great War, who were tearing the world to pieces by force and trickery, under the mask of right, he had hastened to snatch his morsel by right of might, and had chosen for himself the more cowardly part. He saw once more the young girl kneeling on the pavement, and suddenly he flung back the bedclothes ; he must rush to the place where he had left her. What for ? To help her up ? Idiot ! He sat, naked, on the edge of the mattress. On the other side of the partition, his mother turned over in her bed. He held his breath and lay down again. He felt the girl's dry mouth under

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his teeth. He bit into her lips once more. . . . A fresh gust of cruelty shook him. "Never mind ! You bear my mark ! And if you meet me again I shall recognize you, and you will not be able to recognize me." "She is alive, and judging me." He could not bear the thought, and that she lived. "If only she were dead." And with that quickness of thought which leapt from himself to the world, while ceaselessly going round and round the same subject, he understood why the man who has touched crime with a finger, plunges his whole hand in—so that he shall see her no more. Then came a flood of pity : "Let her live—May she be happy !" He longed to kiss the bruises on her round knees. Having reached this point he was not far from feeling once more the brutal urge which had made him seize her, and from starting again upon the burning circle of his course. So he kept on all the rest of the night passing from stage to stage ; pity and cruelty, hatred of himself or her, remorse, regret for what he had done and left undone. Round and round without stopping. Defeat was at the end of the course, the only fixed point in the chaos. Beaten ! He had no strength against the blows of chance. He had no control over his thoughts and actions ; at the first encounter with a wave from the depths, his will melted like a jelly-fish. At that very moment he did not know what life would make of him in a year. This ignominious conviction hit him in the face. "No ! No ! Crime rather !" He sat up in bed and beat his breast with his fists.

"I will, I will ! What do I will ? To be what I want to be ! "

From the other room, his mother's voice murmured tenderly : "Do go to sleep, my darling ! "

He did not answer. Anger : "She is spying on me." A gush of love. "She understands." Irritation, gratitude, the scales oscillated. Neither one nor the other ! "I am alone, and I will remain so."

He lay quite still with his head on the pillow. On each side of the wall, mother and son lay with open eyes in the darkness.

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Annette thought to herself :

" I was wrong to speak. It is his own affair. He must settle it alone."

But, without speech, their allied thoughts in alternate waves, mutually impregnated each other. And little by little, the same equilibrium established itself within them at last. When dawn reappeared at the window, it found them ready to meet the day, with its illusions, its pitfalls, and its struggles ; scarred by one more defeat, but looking it in the face, and eager to begin again. Those Rivière souls ! What morning of defeat could stay their course !

But while the boy, after a sleepless night, standing shivering in the icy water of his bath, put on once more the vesture of the flesh, his eyes looked deep into the abyss of the epoch and the world into which he had been cast ; he saw his extreme weakness, the disasters and shame that lay in wait for him upon the road.

And he sighed :

" To reach the end ! "

" To reach the end,"—that is, not to fall by the way. To fall, yes. But at the end ! Shame and disasters, so be it ! But to pass on at any cost. To pass on ? Oh, God ! To have passed ! . . . He stretched himself by anticipation in that repose of the hereafter. . . . To be no more ! . . . Impossible till one has been.

He put the outer coverings of stuff on his youthful skin, reddened by the loofah. And with reinvigorated flesh, setting his teeth, the young wolf started out again upon life's chase.

III

Yet that chase is a splendid adventure in other times ! In spite of all that Society has invented to poison youth by chaining it to the galley-slave's benches (schools, armies), the turbulence of twenty is a fine thing !

But the twenty of 1918 was not on a par with that of normal

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life. It equalled eighteen as well as eighty. It was made up of ill-assorted bits and pieces of every age ; too much and at the same time not enough for clothing ; the seams burst at every movement, revealing passions and bare flesh.

The pre-War men who had planted them did not recognize their own seed. And to the sons who had lost their fathers, those pre-War men were as strangers whom they despised and came near to hating. Even among themselves, the young men were hard put to it to understand each other. Each one was a separate puzzle. If only life were a game ! Many of them tried to maintain that it was, in order to convince themselves. But they knew very well that, if so, it was a terrible game, a game of madness. Everything had been destroyed, and the wind that blew over the field of ruin was laden with the stench of the charnel house. Where could they rebuild the world ? With what stones, upon what soil, and on what data ? They knew nothing ; they could see nothing in the smoking chaos. Everything was lacking except arms. But it is hard for boys of twenty, to condemn their arms, as their only lot, for all their *giovinezza*, so menaced, and so fleeting, to the harassing task of navvies, with no one to guide them. How could they know that before they had even raised the first walls upon the quivering ground, a fresh earthquake would not demolish them ? Who could believe in the duration of a world supported by the treaties of crime and stupidity ? ✓ Everything was tottering, nothing was sure, life had no morrow : to-morrow the abyss might reopen, war, wars, at home and abroad. There was nothing to hold on to but the passing day. It was cling to it with hands and feet—ten fingers and ten foes—or be lost ! But where to seize the passing day ? How to dig one's nails into it ? It cannot be clutched, it is shapeless, it is slippery and sticky. To approach the whirling mass is to be thrown out as from a sling, or be drawn in, and sink to the bottom.

But when one is twenty, and like Marc (he was in fact, barely nineteen), one persists, determined to fall neither inside nor outside. One grapples with the passing day, and enters its

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womb. To possess you and then die like the males of the insect world !

And in that fever of clinging hands there was such lassitude ! Such a monstrous burden for the shoulders of a boy ! Ah, what an overwhelming task !

✓Lucky are they whose life is restricted to one path, who have but one need to satisfy ! But Marc had four or five famished cravings gnawing his vitals. He must *know*, he must *capture*, he must *enjoy*, he must *act*, he must *be*. And these little foxes, which he kept hidden in his bosom like the Spartan boy, bit each other as they bit him ; they could not all be satisfied at once.

Which was the most urgent : to *enjoy* or to *know* ? To *know* first of all ! Young Rivière could not endure the thought of leaving this life before he had seen and known it. It seemed to him that he would wander for ever in a black despair worse than all the hells ever invented, for the rest of eternity. (For vainly does one believe in no hereafter. To a heart of twenty, nothingness is the most implacable of all eternities.)

How to know ? And what to know ? One is ignorant of everything. And, first of all of where to begin ? Everything is called in question, and everything assails you at once. Education, in the years of the War, left the most incredible gaps, which will never be filled up. The mind was wandering elsewhere, the body likewise. Marc was oftener in the streets than on the school benches; and when he condescended to seat his thin buttocks thereon, the hard bright eyes of the lean young wolf were lit by strange gleams. Through the drab walls he was pursuing game of a different sort than the old carcases of the University. At rare intervals, the tone of a master, the shock of some word, disclosed the warm shadow of a piece of life. He pounced upon it, but he was unable to place this fragment of the immense Real. Through lack of attention he had missed the opening of the exposition ; he let go, and all the rest slid into the void. If a chart had been drawn of the ideas he had registered in any department of knowledge whatever, it

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would have looked like one of the old maps of Africa, showing more blanks than details, with the great rivers cut off short like a lizard's tail in a cat's mouth : they disappeared, and imagination filled the gaps with villages, mountains, fables, sand, scattered here and there. There were whole centuries of history, strings of theorems, nearly whole provinces of the narrow classical domain in which the teaching of the Alma Mater timidly restricts her nurslings to a few old gilded, faded, moth-eaten apartments (she claims that they are the finest in the world !) there were beaten highways of the mind, of which Marc's brain showed not a trace. Nevertheless, he had passed his final examinations with scores of other dunces, who knew no more than he did, and whose eyes lacked the insolent flame of intelligence that shone in his. They were indulgent in those days to the sons and brothers of heroes : (if they were not, they might have been !) But Marc had not an ounce of indulgence for those who had given him the benefit of theirs. A good horse never forgives the foolish rider who spares him the whip. The experience of those years had ruined the authority of all the men and books respected by the previous generation. What they had read—(little and carelessly)—was not in tune with the present. However little they might know of the realities, which all the accredited liars, the tricked tricksters had camouflaged for them, the young men were safeguarded by their instinct and unjaded senses, which detected domesticity of mind regarding the state, and senility of rhetoric, in all their masters.

Even supposing that somewhere, in France or abroad, forces of liberty and truth were at work, they had been carefully discredited beforehand to the young men, and they had no mind to revise false convictions : their confidence was poisoned. They lumped together all the thought of the preceding half-century (and very nearly that of all time !) under the disdainful phrase : “ Hot air !—Skins blown out with words.” They little thought that their own young skins would only inflate themselves with other words : they make up nine-tenths of

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the human mind, if it refuses to remain empty ; and a void drives it mad : it is most true that nature has a horror of it. She cannot resign herself to saying :

“ I do not know.”

We must know or die !

IV

But first of all one must eat. And bread does not drop into the mouth of a Marc Rivière if he does not go in search of it. Unless he snatches it out of his mother's mouth ! His pride exclaimed : “ Enough ! In future I will earn the bread I eat.”

He had two definite tasks that morning. Two beacons in the fog that still filled his brain, as it filled the city. A lesson to a red-headed American, with pink eyelids, attached to Wilson's Legation, who lived in the neighbourhood of La Muette. And a manuscript of insane poems which he had fumed over as he corrected the French, hashed up in the style of Brazil, at the behest of a yellow-faced man from Rio, who lodged near the Sorbonne. The door of his first client was shut fast. A neighbour informed him that the gentleman of the star-spangled shirt had not come home, and on learning Marc's business added mockingly that he need not worry himself ; his pupil had found a quicker way than his, of improving his French. Marc, in a fury, fell back on his second client. The concierge stopped him on the stairs : the gentleman with the jaundiced complexion had just died, cut off by Spanish 'flu. He had left no address. Marc remained sole heir to the poems.

Death had ceased to be a surprise. Yet on the day after the Armistice guns it created a confused sense of disappointment : “ Is nothing changed, then ? ” But, in Marc, irritation prevailed against the dead man, who after inflicting an absurd task upon him, had decamped without paying.

He scowled angrily, black as a thundercloud. The clear glance of a young girl pierced it. He recognized the grey eyes of a white-skinned brunette, his fellow student. He relaxed

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at their mocking smile. She had passed him. With calm, brisk steps, her slim legs carried her towards the Sorbonne. After a moment's hesitation, he followed her. At that time the University library had become a kind of headquarters for some of the young people; they assembled there to pool their doubts. He caught up with Henriette Ruche on the stairs. The mocking eyes examined him :

" Heavy eyes. Muddy complexion. General gloom. The morning after the spree ! "

" It doesn't seem to have troubled you. You look as though you had had a good night's rest."

" Yes, I slept very well, thanks."

" And you weren't even tempted to put your sharp nose outside ? "

" I saw quite enough from my window. A den of wild beasts."

" I was one of them."

" Of course."

" Thank you ! " he said with an air of annoyance.

" Did you expect me to doubt it, then ? "

" Better and better ! "

They had reached the threshold of the library. She patted her hair, looking at herself in the glass panel of the door.

" One more or less ! You mustn't mind." She went into the reading-room.

Marc saw some of his friends.

FRIENDS was hardly the word. There were no great friendships between these boys, they were all too much taken up with themselves. And, personally, young Rivière stood rather aloof from those of his own age. He was not much liked because of his touchy temper, his reserve, and his, too often, contemptuous way of speaking, the harshness of his judgments, and also because of his marked superiority at school, and in the examinations. But whether they liked it or not, for those very reasons he enjoyed a certain authority. His mother's influence had made him immune, before the others, from the contagion

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of the collective imbecility. He had not waited, like the others, for the end of the War, to discover the universal impotence and to proclaim it aloud. This advantage over them, which had once made him thoroughly unpopular, brought him some credit now that their eyes were open. They were fair enough to admit that the *Marcassin* (*anglicé*, young wild boar) had been quite right.

What they all needed, at the moment, was not someone to love, male or female (both love and hate were cheap just then !) but some clear-sighted person whom they could believe. They were four or five young men who had nothing in common but the discovery of the abominable trick ; a discovery which had struck each of them separately like a slap in the face. Shame and rage at having been taken in, the need of vengeance, and, above all, of defending themselves against future trickery, drew them together into a group apart from the rest of the flock. They were obliged to call a truce in their disagreements and antipathies in order to pool their strength and weakness—they were not friends—they were allies. They groped together like blind insects feeling their way in the dark with their antennæ. And each of them, without showing it, was waiting for the others to speak the stirring word which would put him on the right scent.

None of them knew much more than the others, but they had been brought up in different surroundings, so that each one of the five brought some gleams of experience which the others lacked, and the varied resources of his own character.

Adolphe Chevalier, short, stout, and quiet, was a young bourgeois from the provinces, belonging to an old family of Berry, magistrates and owners of fine sunny estates. The highly developed produce of a race as carefully cultivated as their fields and vineyards, he was the most "honest man" (in the obsolete classic sense) of the five, thoroughly French, very particular, eloquent, and the slave of many habits. They hampered him at every step. Yet he got along, walking with legs apart, sedately and not too fast. The others made mocking

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allusions to the Arms of Bourges: "An ass in an arm-chair."

Fernan Véron-Coquard overwhelmed him with his size, loudness, and disdain. Tall, thick-set, fleshy, sticking his chest out, he made the floor creak with every step of his huge feet, and the windows rattle with his voice like a double bass. He had one of those broad beefy faces which are the outcome of the War, and look as if they had been suckled on blood instead of milk. At the sight of them, one hesitates as to whether they are most like the ducal grooms of Napoleon I, or Coquelin declaiming as Scapin *imperator*. The son of a profiteering manufacturer grown rich during the War, Véron made no bones about proclaiming this fact on every occasion, adding: "Don't speak of theft in the house of the thief." The withering contempt he displayed for his father, and the gang, did not interfere with his affection for the author of his being, nor, above all, did it imply any intention of refusing to benefit by the spoils. He did not hesitate between the fleecers and the fleeced. "So much the worse for them, the idiots! And so much the damned better for me! If they had had my guts, they would have blown Society to smithereens by now. Perhaps they'll do it yet; and I'll help them. Meanwhile, I eat. I'm not going to deprive myself for someone else who wouldn't get as much pleasure out of eating as I do. We don't care a damn about the right, we have taken its measure. Our only honour, the honour of to-day, is not to tell lies. If I am a swine, I know and admit it. Our first task in the way of public clearance is to burst up all the humbugs, lies, and idealism. To the rubbish heap with Wilson!"

Adolphe was choking with rage, it was one of the few subjects which upset his usual majestic bearing. Simon Bouchard was foaming, his eyes starting out of his head, he could hardly find words to express his feelings; but when they came out at last, like stones from a catapult, they were crushing and obscene. Their savour redeemed their enormity. He and Véron seemed to hate each other to the death, and yet they were

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always seen together. They were made to measure their strength against each other. Bouchard was the son of a small farmer, a bursar of the college and a hard worker. On the school bench he was still a beast of burden, an entire cart-horse, with the frame of a Cyclops and a mind built up of arguments laboriously learnt and assembled. Thick and heavy within and without, he was rough and clumsily built. He had believed firmly in the ideology of the War. He now believed firmly in the intangible "Fourteen Points" of the American Messiah. He was bound to be everlastingl taken in. But those who duped him did not make a good bargain, for once undeceived he never forgave, and unquenchable hates were thrown, one on the top of the other, into the sack he perpetually carried with him on his desperate march in search of some fresh truth.

Jean Casimir Sainte-Luce encumbered himself with no such baggage. Still less was he concerned with any such quest. His grand name was the only *impedimentum* with which he was burdened, and he was quite determined to drop it at the first opportunity.

He owed it to a Polish father, whose generosity had stopped short at that after he had sown him in the silken flanks of a French cinema star, a creole from the Antilles, who boasted of her kinship with the pretty slut immortalized by Proudhon, Josephine the First. He had his mother's small bones, velvety eyes, and the delicate thumb-mark in the hollow of the cheeks. He was made of quicksilver, ardent and refined. He needed no pretext for being ever on the move. Nothing could restrain him, he had not the least regard for invention, morals, or reason. He wasted no time breaking lances. But he watched others breaking them, and laughed at every good stroke. He was a born spectator, never tired of shows, and never counting his steps in going to find them. A Puck going to and fro on the face of the earth, tickling its nose. Véron scornfully called him Sainte-Puce, otherwise "the flea". Puck could have landed him with ten gibes for one: but in his alert nonchalance

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he considered the animal just right as he was ; fit to be roasted in his skin, and needing no further garnish.

And so they kept together, with no illusions about each other, and each without much illusion about himself. This was even their chief bond of unity. In the same spirit of irony and cordiality, they accepted Marc, drummer of Arcola, with his thin, troubled face, and air of a young starving dog. They took no warm interest, perhaps no interest at all, in what lay behind his looks, or in his personal preoccupations : each of them had his own, and kept them to himself. Individually, Marc would have made them feel ill at ease—if anything on earth could have done so. He took everything too seriously, even in his implacable irony. For them, to do that was to be “dated” (ahead of or behind the time ? No matter ! the clock wasn’t right). But for their common purpose, the undermining of the present world, in order to clear the way for themselves, Marc’s piercing glance, and the hard lines about his haughty mouth, were allied contingents which they appreciated. He was one of them.

Then there was also the small fry that gathered round them : a few honest youngsters, anxious to think, who did not think for themselves, listeners trying to get a word in. But the Five rarely condescended to answer them ; they talked to each other. The others formed the circle. They were useful for transmitting and propagating the decrees of the Five.

At the other end of the room, another fairly large group was assembled : they were the “*Action Française*”. The two bands pretended to ignore each other : they had a crushing contempt peppered with hate for each other. And as both sides talked very loudly—much too loudly, in spite of the objurgations of the indignant librarian, of whom nobody took the slightest notice—at every moment provocative words made the hot water boil over on to the fire. Such indeed was their object. And at need, the transmission agents did not fail in their duty, which was to carry the challenge, all hot, from one camp to the other. Luckily the gaiety of youth was still alive

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in the heart of these partisans, and the humour of an insulting message could disarm the hostility of the enemy.

Then, sitting apart with a superior smile, were those indifferent to public affairs, those to whom war, peace, and treaties, were nothing but dirty politics from which it is better to keep aloof, looking after one's business, career, pleasure, laboratory of the mind, art, science, or trade. They were the good housewives who despise idle and disorderly women. There was some real worth among them. Félicien Lerond, who looked like a big spaniel, with short legs, a snub nose, short-sighted eyes, a bewildered expression, a narrow forehead, thick hair, and an open mouth which always seemed about to cry : "Eureka !" Simple Simon in the bath of Archimedes—the lucky fellow had a decided vocation for science. It saved him the trouble of thinking of what was going on around him. Outside his own speciality, only the native shrewdness of the French peasant saved him from being a perfect fool.

There were some little idiots, apostles of æstheticism, who thought themselves the aristocracy of intellect, because they did not deign to trouble themselves about the needs of social action : no doubt it did not try to spur them on very much ! They were fond of quoting pretentiously the decree formulated by the augur Valéry : "*That it is impossible to take part in politics without giving an opinion upon questions of which no man of sense can say that he has knowledge. One must therefore be infinitely silly or infinitely ignorant to have any opinion upon most of the problems set by politics. . . .*" They were proud of having none. They had a perfect contempt for both camps of disputants, who returned their contempt in kind.

Finally, on the other side of the table, just opposite the Five, Henriette Ruche, with her grey eyes under their long lashes, her fine sharp nose, and her smile, had quietly installed herself. She had wisely spread around her the books which she had set herself the task of consulting that day. But for all that she did not miss a single word of what was being said, while her long thin fingers, of which one or two nails were bitten, ran

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over the paper marking exactly what she was reading. She even found room in her well-ordered head, with the too high forehead concealed, to let in at one ear and out at the other the stream of futile confidences whispered to her by plump little Elodie Bertin, who had perched herself sideways on the edge of the table. . . . The owner of the name Elodie would not confess to it—except to everyone in private ; for she was incapable of keeping a secret. She had re-christened herself Elizabeth, turned it into Babette in accordance with the current fashion, and finally (let's abbreviate) to Bette. The Five agreed that this last name fitted her like a glove. She talked, talked, talked. She was always to be seen with chin raised and mouth open. There are some races, such as the English, who seem to speak before they open their mouths, or even to speak without opening it. But Bette of Paris, for fear of being too late to speak, kept her mouth open before she spoke, while she spoke, and while she was taking breath to begin again. She was pretty, gentle, round and plump. She did credit to the house that had nourished her, and of which she was the heiress—the great provision shops in the Boulevard d'Odessa. She did less credit to the house of Robert Sorbon, where she had taken it into her head, God knows why ! to get a degree. Intellect, for her, had the lure of some far-off land. Truth to tell, she was more interested in the inhabitants than in the country ; and the word "degree" did not so much suggest to her a tiresome brain-racking examination, as intercourse, amazing to the tradesman's little daughter, with the most free-minded youth of the world. The friendship of Henriette Ruche, whom she admired to distraction, and who let herself be waited upon—on condition that it was at such times and in such manner as suited her convenience—had introduced her into the circle of the Five. They were not too particular about a girl's brains, so long as she had sense enough to please them. And, in that, the silliest is never lacking, if she hails from Paris. But girls must not expect much gallantry from them. They had no time for it : to waste time in

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love affairs was no longer the fashion. As Morand says, a woman has only three garments to undo nowadays. It was take it or leave it. With Bette it was clearly take it. With Henriette, no. But they did not "leave it", although her long, thin, greyhound build, did not invite the teeth of these young carnivora. Véron who seemed to have tried his on it and broken one, nursed a grudge against the bone : he called the two girls "La Laide" and "La Bête". However, not one of the Five hesitated between the two. It was "La Laide" (they didn't own it) that they coveted. And it was for her (they didn't own it) that these boys, who flaunted the intelligence of females among the collection of things they despised, were raising their voices and showing off in their tourney, at that very moment. She was in no sort of doubt about it. But she showed no sign of it except the irony about her downy lip. She did not seem to be listening, but she took everything in ; she was silent, but for a careless word of agreement thrown every now and then into Bette's babbling brook, and while her eyes followed her fingers over the pages, she studied, through her lashes, every air of each of the five toréadors. The only one of the Five who caught, in passing, the point of her glance through his mail, was Puck, who was always idling, his roving eye on everything at once. And as the discussion of ideas had nothing more for him than the rather stale interest in the jousting of the combatants, he had leisure enough to mingle with the spectators. He migrated to the other side of the table, and began a chat with Bette, which was aimed, through her, at "La Laide". The babbling brook carried pointed remarks from one to the other. Véron was jealous, and said to Bouchard : "The flea is making for the Maid." For they had both nicknamed her "The Maid of Orleans". She came from there (I mean the place) and they claimed that she still had *it* (I mean the qualification) : the qualification was a subject of discussion between them. They made no secret of it, even in her presence. She never flinched, neither admitted nor denied. Cold and mocking, her

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chin in her hands, she looked them in the eyes. Which was it ? They admired her, whichever it was. She held them (and all their secrets) ; they did not hold her.

That is why, after a tumult had broken loose (Véron had roared loud enough to shatter the windows : " After the shield, the pale for the Tiger, I seat him on it " ;—and the *Action Française*, with a simultaneous shout, rose up ready to fall upon him—whereupon the librarian bawling louder than all the rest, made up his mind at last to clear the room), and the five companions had agreed that they could not hold their sessions there in future, and the question arose as to where they could meet, no one was surprised when Bouchard proposed :

" At the Maid's."

She accepted it as her due.

V

She was the daughter of a solicitor, a man of brains, kind-hearted and upright, but proud, imperious, and " ireful ", a tyrant to himself and his family, a real "*waspish son of Orleans*". *The waspish spirit*, said one of our ancients of the League, who knew what he was talking about : "*intractable, quarrelsome, mutinous*". It was a bad day for him when he begat a daughter, whom he adored, and who loved him, but who was as *waspish* as himself, and not disposed to give way to him. All her opinions were the exact opposite of his. It is not at all certain that if he had thought the contrary she would not have changed over. This was not, as it is all too easy to declare, from a feminine genius for contradiction. It was for the sake of living. When a despot will not give you breathing space, when he imposes *his* truth, though that truth may be your own, it oppresses you, it kills you, and one hates it, and would rather run and throw oneself into the bed of the counter truth. Her father was imbued with the old-fashioned principles concerning education, the family, the State, girls, women,

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marriage, and morals, according to the Law. Henriette Ruche had shed them all, like the twenty obsolete garments of woman's clothing.

She had had plenty of time for reflection. Through all the chimeras of tyrannical idealism in which the old rhetorician delighted, she saw the reality that lay in wait for her, the mean, cold, grey future of a girl with no memory, in the provinces. What little they had had melted away during the last years of the War. Her father's professional income had become just enough to cover expenses. What would remain after his death? He did not seem to worry himself about it! Do one's duty! Those whom he left behind him would only have to do that, as he did. Some other provincial lawyer would surely be found, young or old, more or less plain, poor, like himself, who would be willing to marry his daughter. The daughter had other views. Gone was the time when a wife bowed down, like her mother, awaiting her husband's good pleasure! One fine morning, the young girl, who daily endured her father's shower-bath of principles, with tightened lips and icy, ironical air, but boiling inwardly, said in a calm, clear voice :

"What belongs to the past will never return."

He stopped, taken aback.

"And what belongs to the past?"

She said :

"You."

There followed uncomfortable days and months, when the atmosphere of the house was bleak. It blew a gale, or it drizzled. The mother felt the chill most, unarmed between the two combatants. She had danced attendance on father, brothers, and husband all her life. Disconcerted, not without fear, and perhaps not without a secret feeling of getting her revenge, she watched her own revolt by proxy. The lawyer's vehemence wore itself out against the wall of this girl's ironical indifference—his daughter—who listened piercing him through with her cold, unwavering, disconcerting glance. It made the

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words stick in his throat : he felt that they were useless : worse still, those eyes that never left his own, said plainly : " You don't believe it." He flew into a rage, to make himself believe it. It was not the way to get the best of it. She never lost her temper. The solicitor would more easily have convinced four or five heads, against the feeble eloquence of barristers, than the hard nodde of this girl, with the short hair flattened down on the crown as by a morion. It had been quite a tragedy at home on the day that she walked in new-shorn, with a beating heart, and nose tilted provocatively ; enfranchised : Delilah who had cut off her own hair to break the chains of Samson. The old man nearly had a fit at the sight. And this " Don Diegue " thought himself dishonoured by the spectacle of her slim legs, free at last, and out of their prison up to the turn of the knees, which the hem of the handkerchief-dress, with some trouble, could just be made to touch without covering them. "*O tempora ! O mores !*" But if the father never tired of thundering, the daughter soon tired of listening to him.

*" When it has thundered and thunders again
We see the horn of the coming rain "*

says the wisdom of nations. Ruche of Orleans showed two horns. She declared calmly that "*quarrelling increases neither grain nor goods*", that they were wasting time, and what was most important to her, her youth, in discussions ; that no one had the power to bind the living to the dead, and that she claimed her right to make herself independent by going to study in Paris. Prayers, threats, arguments, all were useless. Her father refused. She went. One night they found the nest empty of the magpie. She wrote from the Latin Quarter. For fear of a scandal he gave in. She stated her terms. The solicitor stated his. They debated the matter in stiff, icy letters. Father and daughter loved each other with hatred. The former assigned a starvation allowance to the latter : out of pride the latter refused it. It took the entreaties of the

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mother to bring about a *modus vivendi*; she made the "waspish" father realize that it was dangerous to defy a "waspish" daughter to find the means of living in Paris for herself. He shuddered at the thought: his furious obstinacy had made him forget what his own blood was capable of doing out of obstinacy! He hastened to sign the treaty. A modest allowance in exchange for a promise of hard work, to be proved by the examinations. The promise was kept. Henriette Ruche, who thought herself free from prejudices (she considered the old morality as one) had a virtue and a vice which took their place; her woman's pride, a concentrated triple essence of it. Between her and her father, and between her and the little provincial world that criticized and spied upon her, a challenge had passed. She accepted it. Not a word to be said against her conduct. At least, to all appearance. She guarded herself. As to what lay beneath, it was her own affair, she was accountable to nobody. What was patent to all was that she succeeded regularly in her examinations; her masters testified that her remarkable intelligence equalled, or surpassed, that of the best of her fellow students, distracted by other thoughts. And yet intellect was far from being the reason of her life. She remained an enigma to all who came in contact with her. Perhaps she was an enigma to herself.✓

She lived not far from Val de Grace, at one of the narrowest points of the rue St. Jacques—that old violin string stretched over the bridge of the Montagne Ste. Geneviève, with hollows and knots. The old house quivered as beneath the bow vibrating with the passing of the heavy motor-buses. On the ground floor could be heard the rattle of the wares in an iron-mongery and the tinkle of bottles in a wine shop. The narrow door on to the street, and the dark staircase of worn stone, led to an entresol squeezed under the projection of the first story. The single room, with no hall, which constituted the whole flat, opened directly on to the staircase, it had primitive access to the shop on the ground floor, by means of a staircase under the flooring. The dim light was made dimmer by the heavy cur-

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tains, sent from home. The long room presented the outline of a pregnant woman, following the line of the winding street which curved outwards round the façade of the house. It had three windows, one of which, an *aïl-de-bœuf* in the corner of the projecting part, which was up two steps, corresponded to the knot of the violin-string. It was the only part of the room where the light was sufficient. Perhaps it had once been a platform alcove which could be separated from the rest of the room by a curtain on a rod. Ruche had made it her nook. She had found a good place there for her only piece of luxury, an old Persian rug from her room in Orleans, which had doubtless been in the possession of her family since the despoiling of some church in the days of the Revolution. She spent part of her days there, when she was not walking about the streets of Paris ; she settled herself in her nook, with legs crossed, smoking one cigarette after another, day-dreaming, with knitted brows, bursting into laughter at some passing thought (her friends knew nothing about it, she kept the thoughts, and that shrill laugh to herself) or, when she was very tired with walking, she lay down, not full length (the niche was rather a tight fit for her slim length, but like a bow, her knees drawn up under her chin, holding her feet, aching from the pavement, in her hands. She worked there also, squatting on the floor with her books spread round her, fountain-pen in hand, taking advantage of the last ray of light that fell through the *aïl-de-bœuf* on her tireless eyes, keen as tempered steel, when darkness had already invaded the rest of the room. Screens in the four corners, concealed the various "intimacies" of the toilet, meals, and the rest. She called them her four cardinal points.

There were a few odd pieces of furniture. Several cheaply made divans. A long table covered with papers, which could also be used for sitting on. Two or three chairs. A wood coffer. (The fire was not often lighted. The old fireplace was mainly a passage for draughts.) The drab walls were covered with vivid coloured hangings, curiously grouped by Ruche's expert eye : she had a greed for colour ; but like the working-

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women of Hungary, who keep their most gorgeous embroidery shut up in a drawer, she seemed to enjoy its brilliance better imprisoned in the twilight of her room. Fastened to the hangings, here and there, were photographs of the works of Gauguin, Matisse, Utrillo, which evoked for those who had heard them, the tones of their keyboard of light. A plaster head of a little nun of the *fabliaux*, with downcast eyes and a sharp nose, faintly resembling the hostess, the cast of which had been taken from a façade of Rheims Cathedral, before the War, welcomed visitors at the entrance. Her slight smile, that of a Gallic *Giaconda*, gave them warning. To put them completely at their ease (or on the defensive), the little portable bookcase, placed under the mirror, against the wall of the *œil-de-bœuf* in the nook, well in the light, proclaimed, not without a dash of defiance, the French tastes of the inmate. Villon, the *Contes* of Voltaire and La Fontaine. There was, perhaps, a spice of mischievous bravado about the choice, but it corresponded to a true and guileless racial instinct. The funny part of it was that the solicitor of Orleans, who at home and in court brandished his cardboard thunderbolts against all irreverence towards the code established by the State and Society, if he had seen these pure gems of the mind of shameless Gauls on his daughter's table, would have felt very much inclined to take off his hat to them. For all the efforts of Rome and Judæ to fill the mouth of France, and pack her bag of memory, the bag is Gallic and there are good tricks in it; every good Frenchman recognizes and enjoys them. But on Ruche's shelves, as was right and proper, Racine stood side by side with Voltaire, Descartes with La Fontaine; the French family. And as the breakfast of a young, new-fledged scholar is seasoned with a grain of pedantry, she had added Lucretius. But though she could read Latin a little better than her companions, I think, between ourselves, that she never did read him, and more readily consulted *La Princesse de Babylone*. And above all, she liked to read the heart of the young men. It has always been the favourite book of girls. But it is not

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given to all of them to read it well. Ruche had become an expert at it. None of them suspected it. She saw them naked.

They came in and installed themselves, in the free-and-easy way of boys. They never bothered about the mud they brought in from the street, nor the noise and smoke with which they filled the room (the three windows had to be thrown wide open after their visit, to disgorge the smoke and let in the cold night air). They made free with her room and her time as if she had nothing to do but to serve them, without so much as a "Thank you!" But the mistress of the house repaid herself : and she was capable of making them respect her ; if this was not very apparent, it was because she was sure enough of it not to care about it. She was probably too sure of it, as is the failing of young women. But she was eager to know all that went on in the brain of these young males, and she let them relieve their minds, without a word, a gesture, or the flicker of an eyelash to stop their outpourings. She sat quietly rocking herself in a rustic rocking-chair, a cigarette between two fingers, superintending the cups of coffee which Bette, the chatterbox, passed round. (It was Bette who provided refreshments for their evenings, with papa's Mocha.) She only opened her satirical mouth when they condescended to appeal to her, or, without their suspecting it, to turn the debate into the channel she desired, spur it on, or put a stop to it, with a careless stroke of her paw, and two or three unexpected words, very much to the point : then she relapsed into her apparent indifference, with an absent-minded air, as if someone else had spoken. But under her eyelids, lowered like those of the little nun, gleamed the watchful light : a dog at point. She found Bette useful to keep the eyes, or rather the hands, of the companions occupied. But her glance, which did not interfere, never allowed them to go beyond the limit she had tacitly set to the game. They stopped at the extreme edge. The Law of the Hive. Once they had crossed the threshold of the house, she and they were as free to violate the Ten Commandments as the Englishman east of Suez.

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lucid energy, which did not reach beyond a small circle of intellectuals, was liable to be interpreted by weaker souls in search of moral pretexts to dispense themselves from action and its risks, as a Platonic protestation of conscience which could be reconciled with a compromise in action. "To obey while refusing", is it to "*obey*" or "*refuse*"? Action does not admit of the game of yes and no. Action is an axe, it cleaves the *Janus bifrons* in two. To be understood Alain's lesson took for granted, at least, a long sustained tension of the will, an unlimited field of time. Now, it was time and patience that these boys lacked most. The world, arisen, like Jonah, from the belly of the War, was flying, flying with the speed of an aerolite. Faster! Faster! Alain was no longer in tune with it. Like the best pre-War survivors, he was used to living and thinking on the scale of centuries. Adolphe Chevalier was the only one of the Five whose temperament was adapted to the rhythm of this deep slow breathing of a peasant. But, unfortunately, his moral make-up was not firm enough to take the imprint of Alain's broad thumb without deforming it. His sophistry tried to find in it the justification of philosophizing in peace and comfort. Simon Bouchard, who in his rugged energy came nearest to Alain, the man, loved the man more than his ideas; and his crude loyalty, without gradation, soon abandoned him, to pounce upon no matter what doctrine which could provide him with an occasion for action, for action as he understood it, that is, for using his fists. Revolution attracted him. But during the first six decisive months which followed the Armistice it did not attain to shape and being in the West, the unorganized parties pawed the ground without moving, like a blind man tapping the walls with his stick. There was no exact information, as yet, about Russia, blockaded by Clemenceau's troops: it was through them, and through their revolt in the following April, that the truth began to come to light concerning the abortive attempt to strangle a giant nation breaking its chains, made by the renegade statesmen of the French Revolution.

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Among all the disappointments of the young during these first months of Victory—of Defeat—the most overwhelming (they never said so, it was too painful to own it) was the return of the combatants, their elder brothers. From these men's experience—the only experience on which they threw no doubt, for it had been blood-bought—they expected to learn some lessons in living. In their presence alone they felt modest and kept silence. Anxiously they awaited the words about to fall from the lips of their elders. But the elders said nothing, they were as silent as themselves. They evaded questions. They spoke of their new-found life. They were as anxious to resume the chains of daily habits, as the young ones were eager to escape from them. The worst came when some of them, after a few days or weeks, had got into tune again with the conventions imposed by the false and cowardly opinion of the rearguard, and in order to feel themselves more safely re-established, began to talk like them. Even between comrades of the front, scarcely did an exchanged look reveal a secret freemasonry of thought. But to the young brothers who had been left at home, they refused to speak the mysterious word for which they watched and prayed. (Alas ! had they any word to say ? Their tongues had grown unused to speech. What was the use ?) It was the great Betrayal. They seemed to be revenging themselves for their own betrayal by the fathers and brothers of the rear, who had sent them to endure agonies for a lie.

The Five—the Seven (including in their orbit, like our solar system, the two female planets) had more than one experience of it, which left a bitter taste in their mouths. One evening they brought one of their elders to Ruche's room, a friend of one of Bouchard's brothers, who had been killed at Les Eparges. He was the pride of their school, which he was just leaving, crowned with that buzzing expectation (deceptive enough) which University successes excite in a circle of masters and fellow students, when the War took him, and kept him from the first day to the last, except for three intervals of enforced

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rest and patching up in hospitals after being wounded. Hector Lassus had won all the stripes of the hero, who is expected to be a sure and virile counsellor to his juniors. Bouchard had shown the group letters written to his brother, or by his brother, during the first two years of the War, in which the two friends, loudly and firmly proclaimed their resolution to sweep the house clean, when they got back. Then one fell silent—the dead man, and the survivor spoke no more. He had not changed much physically : he looked more masculine, stouter, his skin reddened like a piece of earthenware, apparently more robust than before. He made no show of his disabilities, the weakness of a system shaken by disquieting tremors. He was simple and cordial ; he could laugh. Rather abrupt at first in his manner, having grown unaccustomed to the usual world of the living, he had soon become normal again, but without adopting the crude, wild man of the woods exaggerations, which his young companions sometimes thought it incumbent on them to assume as a cynical mask : he watched them play the part, with affectionate irony. A tired gentleness smiled in his eyes, which while losing nothing of the spectacle, drowsed and dreamed, making up for the lost hours of sleep, the days and nights of life, sheer physical life, with no thought, no aim, empty of past and future, filled to the brim with the present, that shoreless river, of which the constant presence of death, and its ignoble embrace, had deprived him for years ; deprived him of the willows on the banks, the coolness of the waters, the great life that flows along, never the same yet ever the same, the peace of worlds that pass and pass, pass and return, for ever. Not one of these boys, exciting themselves and showing off before him had the least suspicion of all this ; they had never been deprived of it ; they were too used to splashing in the water to realize the blessing of it. What was the good of trying to make them understand ? Too tiring ! They will understand someday. Learn your lesson ! I have learned mine. To all these pairs of eyes, like pistols held at his head asking with angry insistence what he would

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'do, what he meant to do, he answered tantalizing and weary :

"Retire."

They jumped.

"Where?"

"Anywhere. Into my corner, my room, my field."

"And what will you do there?"

"Live."

"What! Doing nothing? Not even writing?"

"I have no ambition left."

"Is that living?"

"Exactly! That is living."

"Explain!"

"It can't be explained."

"And is that all you have brought back from there?"

"Enough for me! If you want more, you must go there too and seek it. As for me I've paid."

When he left the Seven stared at each other, pale, red, furious, astounded. Said Bouchard, rolling his eyes:

"The rotters! The War has castrated our bulls for us!"

As to the few who during the War had held out against War, those who had raised the standard of their opinion high above the hurly-burly, and whom the War lords had so diabolically branded with the epithet "Defeatist", even the most free-minded of them, who knew the inanity of the insult, were afraid of seeming to deserve it,—and had, perhaps a certain secret contempt for those who had not been afraid to risk it. The latter should have had the insolent audacity to adopt the name, and to glory in it, as a gesture of defiance and battle, as the "Beggars" of Holland once did, and as the "Bolsheviks" of Russia were doing at the moment. But it was their weakness to be too wise and to reject violence of thought, and its excesses. Now, excess was the normal temperature of all the post-War young men. And non-violence was synonymous with non-sense in the eyes of the West, intoxicated with the spirit of war, and as yet untouched by the light of the Christ

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of India. To these young men, to be virile was to " violate "—was " violence ".

As to them, these gallants, who prided themselves on " not being oxen " !—these young bulls goaded by their raw virility, they sought, in the devastated pastures of the world where the rich grass was beginning to grow again, for heifers with which to copulate. And forsooth ! of those on two legs there was no lack. But they did not count ; they were a drug in the market; too much is too little ! They would have liked to seize the manes of the idea-forces, generative idea-heifers, who were to renew France and Europe. Where were they ? Their hands groped in the darkness in vain, and discouraged, spread their fingers, and let go. They spent hours wandering in the chaos of things political and metaphysical : for they mixed everything together : for want of precision on any point, they always fell back on generalities—so general that they never failed to sink up to their necks in the mud. Whatever subject they tried to deal with they never knew where to get hold of it, where to begin, they could never get to the bottom of any question : each of them knew a little more than the others (a little less than nothing) upon some point on which the others could but measure the gulf of their ignorance. They got drowned. They digressed. They could only get themselves out of the bog by a scathing irony aimed at themselves and everything else, by negation and violence. Marc was the one who took the discussions most seriously, and the frankest in confessing that he did not know. He was bitter at his own ignorance. Bette thought less of him for it, and Ruche more, but secretly, she observed. Bouchard shrugged his shoulders in contempt : " Act first ! We'll know later ! " Chevalier pursed his lips in silence, too conscious of his ignorance to ignore it, too proud to acknowledge it. Véron fired wildly into space. Sainte-Luce smiled. He made fun of Marc, and the others. He was his choice among them, none the less.

When they had floundered sufficiently in the unknown—the world, action, the morrow—these young bourgeois intellectuals

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returned to their literature like flies to syrup. It was their cone of light. They dabbled in the sugar and the refuse. Each had his own corner of the pot, of which he vaunted the excellence, after gorging himself. Véron was a super realist, Chevalier a Valeryan, Sainte-Luce was discovering Proust, Cocteau, and Giraudoux, Bouchard, Zola and Gorki. Marc, Tolstoy and Ibsen . . . he was behind the times, but those who teased him for it, would have been hard put to it to criticize his choice : for they knew little more of the two names, than how to spell them. In those days young navigators had easy work making discoveries, everything was America to them. Ruche had just quietly discovered Stendhal ; she kept him to herself. The "waspish" one was not prodigal of her honey. Bette discovered nothing, but she accepted everything from the mouth of the others ; all the sugar and spice. It sometimes made her feel a little sick, but she was brave—at eating.

There came a moment when the Seven lost their zest. They fell silent, cloyed, saturated, mumbling, mentally belching, looking at each other with heavy eyes void of thought. Yet they would have stayed there all night, loitering round the table, in the girl's room which they had been poisoning for hours, with their cigars, their breath, and their nullity. They would have stayed there out of exhaustion, as the line of least resistance, because they were there, riveted to their seats, and because of the everlasting expectation of something which had not come and a secret dread of going home without it. Ruche chose this moment to remind them that she was mistress in her own house. She lifted her chin and said firmly :

"That's enough ! I've a right to live. You have used up all the air. I'm going to open the door and windows. Go home to bed, animals ! "

And with a decided gesture of her long, thin, *quattrocentista* hand, she pushed them towards the stairs.

Then they found themselves outside again in the cold night air, in the fog and mud, and the thing that separated them became evident again. They were divided into two classes :

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those who had only to go home and lie down in comfort ! and those who had to think of to-morrow's daily bread. Véron and Chevalier went off with Bette ; or if a taxi was about Véron hailed it, planted Chevalier on the pavement, and carried Bette off, to see her home (so he said !). The other three walked along together for a few moments. There was silence. Sainte-Luce caressingly took Marc's arm ; it gave Marc no pleasure, he coldly let his arm hang down inertly. Sainte-Luce could not resist making a few more frivolous remarks, which were not quite so aimless as they seemed ; he had to empty his quiver of the remaining little arrows against the chatter of the evening, and the chatters. But the other two surlily let his squibs drop into the gutter. He felt himself dismissed, but he bore them no grudge for it. He was too detached from them all not to get another bit of amusement out of their angry determination to detach themselves from him. Then when they least expected it, with a quickly applied fillip on each of their noses, before they could have had time to blow them, Puck vanished into the night. Bouchard furiously turned about and fired his shot at random into the fog, an insulting word aimed at "that Casimir". When he had relieved himself by his snarling, the two who were left, came, at last, to the hidden subject, the chief source of their most poignant anxiety : "How to be free, how to make yourself free, when you don't know how to get enough to eat ?" Bouchard was rarely sure of bread for the morrow, never for the day after. Marc was fed by his mother ; and he knew that it was becoming a problem for her to find subsistence for them both. He blushed at the thought that in spite of his resolutions, he was still living at her expense ; what he earned was not sufficient to provide him with half a meal a day. He was always obliged to ask food of a woman who was wearing herself out. "Enough ! I am determined at any cost to jump into the lake and swim alone." ~~✓~~ Ah ! how all other intellectual cares, their discussions, just now, on art, letters, politics, and the hereafter, all the clashing of hollow blades, with which they fenced, seemed to them, at

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that moment, a silly operatic parade ! Before the beautiful, before ideas, before peace, before war, before the future of humanity, come our jaws. They gape with hunger. Keep them quiet ! Feed them ! ✓

How to solve it?

VI

Annette could cope no longer with her double burden. She was helpless, for all her courage. The means of livelihood were growing rarer and rarer in her sphere. A whole middle class of brain workers, of the old style, the best, the most upright and disinterested part of the liberal bourgeoisie, was slowly dying out, ruined and decimated by the War, by secret bankruptcy, by the loss of hard-earned savings, by starvation wages and by the impossibility of adapting itself to the new conditions, which called for a new race, a race of prey. It was dying down in silence, without a cry of revolt, stoically, as its earlier stricken sisters in Germany, and Austria had done. It is not the first time that history has recorded this downfall—fatal after great wars and social upheavals—of one of the noblest wings of the ancient human edifice. But it is not the custom of history to linger over it. History is made by the living, who trample on the dead, after rifling their corpses. So much the worse for those who fall ! Let the grass grow over them—and silence ✓

Annette was nowhere near falling. She had vigorous arms and legs. She was robust and supple. No task could dismay her. She knew how to adapt herself. But over and above the depressing conditions that weighed upon her class, she had to face special difficulties peculiar to herself. Even in her own class, among the intellectual bourgeoisie, working in poverty, she came up against ill-will on every side. They knew of her "attitude" during the War, and they would not forgive her. Ignorant of the circumstances of her adventure, they knew that she had dabbled in international Defeatism (the two words coupled are the unforgivable sin). She had impudently left

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the Holy Vehm of the country and the war. She should not come in again ! She herself had shut the doors behind her. They had no need to prompt each other, everywhere she found closed doors and stony faces. There was no place for her in any school, public or private, no teaching to be had in the middle-class homes she used to frequent. Her letters were left unanswered. One of her old professors at the Sorbonne, who had always been kindly disposed towards her, replied by sending his card with P.P.C. written on it. She was boycotted. Ah ! that harsh, obstinate stand of the University bourgeois of the old breed, despite their great virtues, their spirit of abnegation which makes them resemble their models (too closely studied), the Stoics of Rome, and the moralists of Ancient France ! They cultivate an implacable intolerance of spirit, sworn alternately to the service of their God and their King, or of their Law and their Country ; and their noses still sniff the odour, if not of flesh, at least of souls, roasted on the pyre of heretic and relapsed who refuse to accept their *Credo*. Yet they are not to be accused of believing with their lips, and evading the burden ! We do not confuse them with those mountebanks of the pen, who played Tyrtæus at home, with their backsides to the fire of their own hearth, safe from the shrapnel, before which they would have taken to their heels, and from the muddy boots of the *poilus* itching to come in contact with them. It was a question of their own blood with these embittered bourgeois. There was not one of these families that had not paid the price. Annette knew it. She did not reproach them for their harshness. This inhumanity of human sorrow is human, too human—especially when the sorrow is not sure that it was not mistaken, that it has not been sacrificed upon a dubious altar by crafty pontiffs. And as the supreme despair would be to acknowledge it, sorrow sets its teeth and would rather die than admit its error. Woe betide anyone who by opposition to the general impulse, by refusal to obey, or by mere existence apart from the flock, makes a breach in the *Credo*.

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Annette took up once more the life of countless temporary jobs of a day or a week, which she had been forced to learn some twenty years ago, when Marc was still in his cradle. She ought to have found it more difficult to get accustomed to it at past forty. On the contrary, however, she felt more supple than at twenty-five. A strange euphoria, perhaps not only attributable to the mental relief brought about by the end of the War, must have had its roots in a state of physiological equilibrium, such as sometimes appears at that stage of life, which is like a high plateau between two stiff climbs. One rejoices over the scramble up, obstacles surmounted, the precipices, to the bottom of which one all but rolled, the healthy fatigue of muscles well exercised, the keen air of the heights breathed in with expanded lungs. As to what may happen later on, there is plenty of time to think of it! . . . "I am in no hurry. What I have I hold. I hold this mouthful of air. Breathe deeply! The nightmare that weighed on Europe and on me, the mass of suffering, are dissipated for a time—a time which will pass too soon—but I am passing also, everything passes—and one must know how to enjoy this time. I have learnt the lesson."

She had reached the stage when one knows, at last, the value of the present hour. And the present hour is good to chew when one has sound teeth. Though the grass be thick with nettles, it is rich and juicy, the very bitterness mixed with it enhances the flavour. Annette browsed in her field. She knew that, joys or sorrows, she had not many left to feel with her muzzle and tear off with her tongue. She was not, like her son (it is the lot of youth, she had been through it), tormenting herself about the morrow, that is, the end of time. He reproached her with it, at the back of his mind. Sometimes his eyes told her so, with bitterness. He thought that she was behaving like the others of that time, the egoists, the short-sighted, the careless, the "After me the deluge—" all those whom he cursed. Yet he did not curse her; throughout the trials endured together, she had become, as it were, a part of

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himself and his rancour melted in the enigmatic light of her blue eyes that laughed at the frowning face of her son. He accepted what he could not understand in her, even if he did not accept it in others. Injustice ! Privilege ? Why not ? It is good to be unjust for the benefit of those we love! And therein lies justice. That is indisputable.

But why did her eyes laugh—even at the torments whose shadows passed across the face of the beloved son—even at the misery of the times—even at her difficulty in making a living ? Truly the present did not give her much cause for laughter ! If she happened to think of it, she was even tempted to reproach herself for it. But she had a reason, mysterious, terrible—one of those which we do not acknowledge even to ourselves, for they seem like an outrage against ourselves and our own hearts, inflicted by some implacable power arising, whence we know not, from the sombre depths. Mingled with all her love for those she cherished most—mingled with all the flood of her passions, mingled with all the new season of her garnered life—in her St. Martin's summer, she felt the rising of the strange Indifference—the Indifference of those who in passion, suffering and joy, have so often used the bonds of Illusion, that those bonds grow loose, and if we keep the mark of them still deeply engraved in our flesh, it is because we have joy of it, and we ourselves secretly draw them tight ; they hold because we love, they hold because we wish, because we will that they should hold. But if we did not wish it ? . . . We know it, we know it ! Better not to think of it. Refuse to think of it as we may, we know it. . . . Clear, terrible, laughing eyes of Liberty !

These are not secrets to be delivered to the young ; and it is better for one's own sake not to go too deeply into them, if one wishes to act. But for a robust well-balanced nature to have the serum injected in the blood, does not upset the balance but establishes it upon richer elements. And action loses nothing, it becomes firmer, more joyous, being more detached from fear and hope. It cannot be explained—unless by a very wise

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guide—but it is only when this stage is reached that we enter into the full enjoyment of life and action, because henceforward with all the fever they may bring is mingled this exalting intuition, this revelation—("Keep your secret close!") *that all this is nothing but a game.*

It was a general disposition of the time, an after-War phenomenon. The strife had been so terrible, the passions engaged so intense, that in order to go on it was necessary to relax the high pressure of the spirit. People played with life; they played with the terrible as they played with joy; they played with love, with ambition, with hate. They played instinctively without acknowledging it to themselves. Formidable danger of an epoch which has temporarily lost the sense of life's values, and for which the greatest have become playthings!

There were but few of these people who did not participate, more or less, in this feeling of a game. Annette, who was apt to feel every passing breeze, had caught the contagion, playing the game in her own fashion. She was predisposed towards it, the "Soul Enchanted".

But in the game of life Annette was no longer merely interested in her own cards, and therefore she could see better into the play of her neighbours, not to take advantage of them, but to play on their side. And if they beat her she would manage that it should not be pure loss to her: when they had gathered in their sheaves, she could always glean a few blades of amusement in their field. She could see the comic side of the unpleasant situations she had drawn in the lottery, and the absurdity of the winners who exploited her. The Burgundian side of her nature had got the upper hand. No more puritanism, no more peevish tendency to a pessimism which the misery of the times, and her own ill-luck might have justified! She went her way, she was perfectly free, and she was not called upon to preach at anyone or anything misshapen or crooked, in her path; she laughed at it with her eyes, saying to herself: "The world is as it is. And I am as I am. Let it try to put up with me! I manage to put up with it!"

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Even the darling son, the dearest Illusion—"Treasure ! you are an illusion like everything else. Light of my eyes, should I still see without you ?") She no longer demanded of him that he should be made in her own image, that he should think as she thought, love what she loved. She laughed, as she looked into him with her free, curious eyes, and saw that incandescent world, and clouds of smoke. Ah ! all was not fair within, far from it ! Animals, cruel, voracious and hideous enough passed by ; hate, pride, luxury, all the vices of violence, but (Blessed be God ! Shall I praise God ? Blessed be my womb that moulded you !) not one vice of baseness. Lots of little wolves. . . . What of it ? No forest of youth is without them. Let them run ! I have put the Master of the Wolf Hunt in the forest. Let him learn his craft !

She laughed at the dear boy, who answered the laugh with angry eyes. Amused, she thought to herself : "What a heartless creature your mother is, isn't she my poor Marc ? Such pain and struggles as lie before you ! And she does not pity you ? Ah, well ! she knows (and you know) that it must be gone through, and must be gone through alone, and you will come through it, battered and bruised, perhaps wounded, but hardened. What do I care for sheltered virtue that has never run any risk ? Take risks ! Jump into the fire seven times seven times ! When you come out you will thank me."

That is why she understood that he wanted to get away from her, and from their home. However free she left him, prudently refraining from questioning him upon anything unless he spoke first, Marc was so touchy that he always imagined that she was watching him. He let it hamper his movements, and chafed at the fetter ; but he shrank back from his angry longing to tell his mother so. She did not need to be told : his huffy abruptness, his sulky silence, made it clear. She forestalled him—Material circumstances also made it difficult for them to continue living together. The terms demanded by a new lease forced them to leave their old flat, and the housing crisis left no possibility of finding quarters to suit them in Paris at a possible

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rent. In short, money was lacking and Annette would probably be forced to leave Paris in quest of it.

VII

It may seem strange that she did not ask her sister for the means to stay in Paris. For Sylvie was in a position to help her ; and she would not have refused to do so. But one has to remember the views of the two sisters and, in spite of their mutual affection, the irritating friction between two headstrong and opposite characters. However much they loved each other, and though each admitted the superiority of the other in her own line, each regarded (a matter of course) her own as the better ; and without quite realizing it, each tried to establish her moral victory over the other in the course of life. Therefore, one could never resign herself with pleasure to asking the other to yield her points. They were both gamblers—Oh ! without caring about the stakes !—and they wanted to win without asking for a fresh deal.

However, Annette had been obliged, a few months before, to give Sylvie's pride and affection the satisfaction of advancing a few thousand francs, to meet her pressing debts, Marc's school fees, and arrears of rent. She still had the spirit of the old-fashioned bourgeois who could not sleep with a debt on their chest. But to her annoyance, she had only changed creditors : she not only had no prospect of paying her sister for a long time, but she saw that she would soon be obliged to ask for further loans. Sylvie was glad of it. She was planning to annex Annette's activity by giving her a share in her business. She had attempted it twenty years before, without success. But she never wearied, in spite of rebuffs. Sylvie, like Annette, was one of those people who, when they get an idea in their heads which life crosses, will stick to it silently all their lives, hoping that life's obstinacy will wear out before their own.

Circumstances were now in her favour. The clever woman

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had the wind in her sails, and was quick to take advantage of it. She had taken advantage of the explosion of pleasure, desires, the delirium of luxury, dancing and amusements. Her *Maison de Modes*, which had yielded enormous profits during the last year of the War, was now being extended to include showrooms, tea-rooms, dancing, recitals, beauty-parlours, and mysterious and luxurious underground smoking-rooms. There people did pretty well everything that can be done—within the limits of good taste and free will: for the abbess of the place was too much a daughter of Paris, free and fine, to allow violence and vulgarity in Thelema. For everything else, the good device: “*Do what you will!*” She had obliged so many in high places that she could feel sure that they would oblige her by seeing to it that no strict inquiries would be made.

For the last six months she had taken to herself a man who thought he had made himself indispensable in the double quality of partner and lover. No one was indispensable to Sylvie, she was never put to it to find a substitute. “*For want of a monk, the abbey does not fall to ruins.*” But the lover and partner was accepted for the time being. It was for her own interest and pleasure. “*Utile dulci.*” He was a master mountebank of fashion. A flash of genius had revealed to him that in order to lead the world you must take it by the nose. He had made himself the ace of perfumery, celebrated on both sides of the Atlantic by the shape of his bottles as much as by their contents. His glory rivalled that of Foch. The gentleman came near to thinking that he did as much honour to France. After all, his way of doing honour had not cost so much. He liked to boast that he was the Napoleon of women; that is of half the world; he left the other half to the First. He signed his products “*Coquille*” (Guy)—(His real name was Coci—but though it is said to bring good luck, it is not for display: some fine day Sylvie would take it upon herself to honour his signature!)

At the moment they held together, bound by the senses

and good sense—that is interest. Coquille aimed high: and thanks to certain sacrifices judiciously made to one of the leading blackmailers of the influential Press, he had no trouble in decorating his buttonhole with the ribbon, an insignia which raised the price of his flasks fifty per cent.

Sylvie made a superb partner for him. The fresh maturity of her forty years had the opulent splendour of Jordæns's nymphs; the blood showed through the skin of forehead and bosom—a little too much—but she did nothing to tone it down: it was one of her charms; a voluptuous emanation rose from it, and from her carnal eyes, she seemed to be bathed in it, splendidly nude. When she looked at herself in the glass, (no mists before the eyes then! her glance under the plucked eyebrows, looked herself up and down, clear, piercing, and precise, like the Petit-Caporal inspecting his company), she sought ironically for the figure of the flat-chested Sylvie, the lean cat of twenty, in the fat shoulders, and the orchard of that bosom—fine crop, full baskets—whose fruit she displayed without trying to hide its proud abundance. For she was sure enough of herself, though a fashionable dressmaker, to defy the fashion which at that time passed a roller over the female figure, back and front. Let others please themselves! *Venus Apygia* be it!: "We will make you anything you like, my dear." But it was not gratis! The least of her morning wraps cost enough to clothe a family. Annette had helped her to find names of price for her creations (the price was added to the bill) borrowed from the fair ladies of Primatice and "*Fontainebleau*". She even amused herself by drawing a few free reproductions for her. Sylvie piled on the compliments, trying hard to persuade her sister that her proper place was at the head of the designing rooms; or that her orderly mind made her the very person to manage, under her superintendence, the new shops that she contemplated opening: for the house was to have branches in several districts of Paris.

But Annette had no mind to make herself a satellite of the planet Sylvie. However sweet the perfumes of the constellation,

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the caravanserai of fashion and voluptuousness had too strong a smell for her liking ! She did not quarrel with Sylvie over her ways of making a fortune. But in that fortune she was determined to have no share ; and her pride was already hurt at having been obliged to accept a few crumbs : she would have no peace until she had repaid them.

In addition (*a thing she took care not to mention*) the Napoleon of the scent-bottles, being along with her one evening in a passage of the establishment had attempted to take liberties which did not go very far, as a gesture had forced him to beat a retreat ; but if Annette's disdainful mind had erased the incident from her memory, the offended flesh had not forgiven him. With a woman who never gives herself by halves, the flesh is proud, and bears a grudge.

Therefore, she had fully made up her mind to accept nothing from her sister. But she left her son free not to refuse, she did not think she had the right to deprive him of help if he chose to take it. He was of an age to bear his own responsibilities. She told him so, taking care to throw no discredit on her sister which might influence Marc's decision. He had too much penetration not to be able to read a mind with which he had become familiar. He understood, and secretly approved her calm inflexibility. Yet he was not disposed to imitate it. Not for the present. He did not see why, if the apple was offered to him, he should refuse the opportunity of taking a bite, and becoming acquainted with an adventurous world. He knew quite well that one bite would not commit him to anything ; and the distrustful boy (he knew the monopolizing Sylvie, as well as his mother, and her tricks to get a hold on you) had made it a rule, in advance, to accept as little from her as possible : for he knew that his aunt never forgot the money she had given, even to those she loved. . . . Oh ! it wasn't the money she cared about ! She cared for the hold it gave her. She liked to think that because of that obligation, those she loved, those she wanted, belonged to her. She would never remind them of it, but she expected them to remember it. It

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was like a secret treaty that they had signed with her ; that they should tacitly recognize it was all she wanted. She wanted too much. It was what a lad impatient of the bit could least tolerate. He would not eat from that manger.

Annette had no anxiety upon that point. She was sure of her colt's independence. Her mobile mouth smiled mischievously in anticipation, at the film she conjured up : Sylvie fishing, with skirts tucked up, throwing the hook to the little fish, which, curious but suspicious, rubs its nose against it, disdains it and makes off. The float quivers, the line tightens. The ready hand, with a quick movement flicks it out of the water. The hook is empty. The bait is gone. The fish likewise. Annette laughed at Sylvie's wrinkled-up nose, she knew her expression of angry vexation against anyone who opposed her will. Marc who had been watching her for a moment, asked :

" What are you laughing at, mother ? "

She looked at him, with his worried suspicious face, perpetually on the *qui-vive*, as if the whole world had nothing better to do than to try to catch him out :

" At you *too*," she replied.

" *Too* ? Who is the *other* ? "

She did not tell him.

No, she had no anxiety on that score, in leaving him alone in the Paris jungle. For she was definitely going. A venturesome opportunity had been offered her. She seized it. After trying half a dozen ways of bread-winning ; copying, shopping, tickets for shops, research in the libraries on behalf of a man of letters who manufactured fictitious biographies (she brought him the documents, which he distorted in order to make a laughing stock of his hero, as vicious, neurotic, grotesque, a clown in a Shakespearian circus, for that was how the new class of clients, ignorant, idle, gossip-mongers, conceived of history : a record of tittle-tattle in the porter's lodge) after scores of useless journeys from one end of Paris to the other (the soles of her feet were hardened by it) Annette had, at last, held a post for a few weeks, as secretary and cashier in a hotel in the Quartier de

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l'Etoile. She knew it would not last long ; for she had been obliged to admit, to her shame, that all her learning had not made her expert in unravelling the skein of book-keeping. But, at the desk she had made acquaintance with a Rumanian family, who had taken a violent fancy to her. From the first words exchanged between them, the three young girls were infatuated ; they immediately confided to her all the secrets of their little hearts. The mother made no mystery of hers, while she consulted her about shops, toilettes and cosmetics—Sylvie's domain, to whom Annette introduced her (such a relationship added no little glamour to her personal attraction for them). Even the very father related his conquests, and begged her advice upon the art of pleasing the women of Paris. Rather a handsome man, with a round head, walnut complexion ochred with bile, opaque eyes like black clay one sinks into, a low forehead, a short chin, and powerful neck and shoulders, rolling his r terribly, with affectation. He was a big landed proprietor of Wallachia, enfeoffed to one of the clans of the feudal middle class who exploited the country ; he had been delegated by his band to the Commission of Reparations. But the abrupt changes of politics had just brought about a change of the team munching the hay in the manger ; and Ferdinand Botilescu, the fodder on his lips, full-fed, was returning to Bucharest with his family. With the cases of finery which they were taking back from Paris, they had a sudden fancy to carry off Annette. Her intelligence, and her sure Parisian taste, her varied experience of life, her easy and charming manners, the natural art of her conversation, were to them a subject of secret amazement and envy. In less than a week they persuaded themselves that she was an indispensable acquisition for them. One night the girls fell noisily upon her neck, with laughter, tears, and sounding kisses, twittering that they could not bear to be separated from her. Their father proposed that she should accompany his wife and daughters as governess, friend, instructress, lady-companion. The limits of these charges were ill-defined. The terms offered with vague generosity were not clearly settled.

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But everything was so wholeheartedly offered, that Annette, who wished to leave Paris, accepted the opportunity. She was not insensible to the overflowing affection of the three affectionate girls, who laid their primitive and complicated souls bare before her. Their unbounded expansiveness was a happy contrast to Marc's restrained nature, and the reserve which Annette forced herself to observe in her relations with her boy.

So she decided to leave Marc. She knew the risks. They were immense. But it could not be helped. He is not thoroughbred who is not equal to running them. Who says life, says death : it is a duel every moment.

She put her hands on his shoulders ; unexpectedly she looked into him, and read him through and through. In her clear eyes he saw himself naked, he made a quick instinctive movement to hide the shameful parts of his mind. But she had seen them. Too late ! He drew in his nostrils, and gathered himself together, irritated. She said :

" My dear boy, I weigh heavily on your shoulders. Yes ! I know it, I understand it, don't defend yourself ! You love me very much, but you want your liberty. It is quite legitimate. A perpetual witness is in your way, I am going to relieve you of her. When one is learning the lessons of life, partners are not wanted ; let them get out ! One must be able to make blunders without an audience ; so go, and blunder ! You know, as I do, that your experiences will often be at your own expense. . . . Only try to make them oftener at your own expense than that of others. Yes, my boy, we are talking as old companions ; I can tell you that I have more confidence in the integrity of your heart, than in that of your mind. And after all, I would rather have it so. You are violent, headstrong, inconsiderate, quick to take and to destroy. I cannot protect you from injustice and wrongs. But (it is the one thing I ask of you) protect the weak, the little ones, all those who cannot well defend themselves, from them ! As to the others, it is their own business, and yours. Let them grin and bear it ! "

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And you too ! Corn is made to be beaten. Go and get yourself beaten ! As the proverb says :

*' Every death hath its battle
And every grain its straw.'*

"I have not got rid of all mine yet. You are my grain. Go to the threshing-floor in your turn ! So that God may make His bread. . . . *Da nobis !* . . . He does not give it to us. We give it to Him. It is we, with our sufferings, who sift His flour for Him."

"I don't intend to be eaten without eating my share too," said Marc.

He spoke roughly, to hide the emotion his mother's words had caused him. She had gone straight to the bottom of things. Further explanations were useless. They understood each other with half a word.

They remained for a moment, leaning against each other, looking into each other's eyes ; and there was a challenge under their tenderness :

(—"I love you. But I won't tell you so !")

"I don't need telling.")

She took him by the chin, and laughed.

"Very well, eat your share, my little wolf ! I have mine."

She kissed him.

Mother and son were not in the habit of kissing each other. They distrusted effusions. This farewell kiss counted all the more. The mouth of one said to the other :

"Burn if you will ! But do not soil yourself ! I place my seal upon you."

At least, the order was so interpreted by the trembling lad, when he woke during the following night. And he was too honest with himself not to know that he would betray it : the order was his own, not that of another. And towards that other, who had commanded for him, during this last night that they slept under the same roof, he was penetrated with a

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respect more passionate than love. He held his breath to listen to her breath coming from the next room. He felt full of troubled desires, heavy thoughts, and would have liked to share their torment with her ; but he thought that she was too upright, too wholesome, to understand them ; and the very confidence she had in him arrested his desire to confide in her : he feared that she would be disillusioned.

Annette slept.' She knew very well that her boy would betray her, and betray himself. Who lives betrays, and betrays himself, from cockcrow to cockcrow. But it is enough to be able ever to hear the crowing of the cock, and to say to oneself at every dawn : " I am beaten. I will begin again." She knew that her boy would never throw down his arms. She asked no more. She slept.

VIII

Marc found himself more troubled than relieved by his liberty. It has always been the most costly of blessings. It was ruinous at that time. One had to be very rich to be able to bear it. Marc knew that he would not get it for nothing ; but he was determined to conquer it by his own resources. Annette, on leaving, had some trouble in making him accept a small advance which would enable him to wait three or four weeks while he looked round. She was not taken in by his youthful boasting ; but she was not sorry that he should make the trial for himself and that life should rap him over the knuckles : the pond was ruffled, her duck would get shaken, but a duck cannot drown in a pond. Moreover, she had not the least doubt but that as soon as her back was turned, Sylvie would be there, on the edge, calling : " Dill ! Dill ! Dill !" —The little duck was warned. Let them fight it out between them !

Marc intended to do without help from anyone. He carelessly refused Sylvie's first offer. She did not press the point ;

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she was as sure as Annette that experience would soon teach the young braggart a lesson. Marc was piqued by the teasing indifference with which his aunt accepted his refusal. Upon reflection he found vague reasons for anxiety in it, a conspiracy against his liberty. He was all the more stimulated to defend it. But he had his work cut out ; for the enemy came from an unexpected quarter. Nobody was conspiring but himself.

He was absolutely at a loss what to do with his life. And yet the necessity for decision was urgent. Life at the moment was a scramble for employment. First come, first served ! But to join the scramble it was necessary to make a choice. No, snatch first ! Or you will arrive after the table is cleared. "But if there is nothing on the table that tempts me ?" "Then there will be nothing left but the crumbs under the table. You will be a dog." "I would rather be a wolf, as 'she' said." But that is a luxury. The exploiters, the masters of the day, reserve it for themselves. The prison for the small fry !

Where was he to find work suited to his shoulders ? In the second-hand clothes shop there is not a cast-off suit to fit these young figures. To an intellectual young man without means, but with his university certificates, the University offers (or used to offer) a natural outlet. One becomes a teacher in one's turn. But to-day the University is on the down grade. It is a beggar. And it accepts its penury without recrimination. Once that acceptance was called noble pride. Nowadays, young mouths spit out the mouldy word. They come near to calling it the bread of sneaks. Yet it was on those terms that our great disinterested savants enriched humanity by their labour. Yes, but on those terms at least they defended their independence. To-day it is their domestication that they are defending. The War years have shown the University as the best servant of power. To be at one and the same time poor and lacqueys, disinterested and servile, is too much for the irony of the young men. They have a fair field for their contempt of "idealism". And in retaliation they boast that

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they must be rich and free—and that they will be. Let us give them rendezvous in ten years !

Of the Seven, two not of choice but of necessity, had taken the joyless path of the University : Bouchard, with rage and rancour, champing the bit, neighing like a rutting cart-horse ; Ruche, cold, ironical, determined ; telling no one of her thoughts, nor of her steppes of ennui. " March on and be silent ! If you stop, you will not start again. . . . But what is the goal ? I haven't an idea. Is there a goal ? Perhaps I shall find it by going on. If not, I will do without it ! "

Marc, hesitating, went a little way with them ; but he had firmly resolved to drop them at the first turning. His mother, while leaving him perfectly free, had advised him, whatever he might decide in future, to take advantage of his training, and to study for his degree ; it was a poor card in his game ; but it is prudent not to reject any card when one has so few. She saw also in this definite aim, though without much faith in it, a salutary constraint of a few months during which the undisciplined spirit would learn to take his first steps alone. So Marc was studying for the examination, but with no conviction that he would pass it or even persevere to the end. His attention was too much distracted by a multiplicity of objects. How could he shut himself up in a retreat of dusty learning, where never a breath of the present could filter through ! All around, the *orbis terrarum* of the mind has been immensely extended. If one wants to embrace it even in a hasty glance there is not a moment to lose ; for nothing is sure, everything is tottering, one lives without a morrow ; to-morrow the gulf of war or revolution may swallow me up. And shall I condemn myself to the asceticism of a scholastic rule ? In the name of what faith ? I have but one faith : seeing and touching. Belief comes after ! It is not for to-day. To-day I must see, see ! And touch everything I can lay hold of. . . .

He was not the only young man possessed by this itch of an impudent little St. Thomas. All round him was a madness of whirling rings of adventurers of the mind . . . poor

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adventurers who parade through every climate of space and time, their *ego*, the lantern of a day, with all its prejudices, and who never look at anything outside, without an inward sidelong glance at the Home, Paris, and its: "What will people say? . . . Those "Did you see me's!" who from the two Poles to the Equator make up their faces for the boulevards! The post-War bookshops are full of the shameless hurry-skurry of books, which reek of the bar and benzine, the great expresses and radio. They are like petards against thought, they jostle art, politics, metaphysics, and turn religion up for spanking. A quarter drunk, but not dupes, ready to jeer at what they crack up or run down, sincere in their need for change, their insatiable voracity, which takes a bite at everything and spits out the second mouthful, fever in their hands, fever in their feet, and fire at their behinds. The world, the whole earth, rushes by, in art cackle, cablegrams from globe-trotters, a bazaar out of a made-up Encyclopædia. Everything thrown in a heap. They dip into the heap. Without pause, an arm is thrust into the sleeve of a garment, a leg into a system—too short! too long! It is thrown aside, they run over ideas without looking at them, never remembering an hour after the colour of the eyes of the one they went to bed with. Who takes the trouble to know the living soul that palpitates in the depths of the ravaged flesh? The world rushes past the mind like a film. Full speed! And shapes are superimposed, melting into one another. The fingers cannot grasp any. They let go. The whole vineyard is torn to pieces by bands of starlings. There will be no wine this year.

But the starlings are drunk. The flock chatters. It takes superhuman efforts to stick to any idea in this whirlwind. Bouchard was wearing himself out in the attempt, with puckered brow and blood gathering in the swellings under his eyes, he struggled to get the stiff clay of his examination books into his hard brain. He did not feel the Arctic cold of his garret. His brain was on fire. But his robust stomach howled. The jaws of the wolf must be stopped till the brain

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had absorbed the day's ration of clay. When it was finished, his tongue was hanging out. He rushed downstairs into the street, like a madman, looking for someone who would stand him a meal. He sought out Véron, and said boldly :

" I've come to help you disgorge your stolen money. In the name of the people, I recover it."

Véron began by laughing. He meant to repay himself by contempt :

" You want a bone ? "

" I want meat," the other replied. " As to your carcase, you can keep it."

Véron's laugh was forced, but out of pride he tried to conceal it. When you play the part of Catilina you must feed the mob. It was not certain at the moment that the mob would not be strong enough to climb on to the ruins. Society was unprotected. A few determined leaders would be enough to storm the breach before the defenders had recovered their breath. But the only leaders who knew it were blockaded in Russia with no means of communication with the mass of the world's beggars. Clemenceau was just establishing on the frontier of Rumania and the Ukraine, his barrages of the Allies' troops, their eyes bandaged by the lies of their Press. In the West the " Pillars of Society " would have time to reorganize themselves.

Yet in those first months of 1919 the air was full of electricity. Véron, whose business relations made him better informed, saw the risk of an explosion. He was cautious enough not to tell his intimate friends what he knew, except such things as entailed no risk of damage to himself, and led to words rather than deeds. He was not crafty, and he was not a coward. (None of these young men are, they would all think little of their skin for the sake of not being dupes, like their elders, those poor wretches—they would say : those fools !) But definitely Véron did not wish to be duped by Revolution any more than by reaction. He was quite ready to overthrow Society if overthrowing had a chance ; if not, Véron would

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overthrow the overthowers. So much the worse for them ! The vanquished be damned ! Contempt for the weak is the motto of such as Véron. Let the weak get out of the way of their broad feet !

Véron was waiting to see if the Muscovite aurochs would be able to force their way through. Meanwhile he and Bouchard would feel the womb of the Revolution in Paris. It did not take long to diagnose that the foetus was dead. The essential organs were lacking. In the confused mass of this revolutionary youth, or that proclaims itself such, there was not one prepared for action. For some, action is simple, too simple : just blows. Hit out right and left, at random. For others, action is discussion of the doctrine. They had not nearly finished, and perhaps they did not care to. The most fanatical doctrinaires are dispensed from action by the duty of keeping the doctrine pure ; action is always, more or less, a compromise. And both parties, the men of action, and those of theory, were crassly ignorant of the living reality, of the organism of the giant States of the day, of their respiratory and digestive apparatus, of their daily economic needs, of the vital laws that command the lungs and entrails of these Gargantuas. Véron, at least, was familiar with the entrails—with money, banks, business, the perpetual hum of the workshop of exploitation, the monstrous machinery which unceasingly chews nature and transforms from element to aliment, to excrement to aliment. He listened and watched these simpletons with his face like a pike. He laughed up his sleeve with fierce pity. He would not drop them though. Not yet ! When occasion offered, his incontestable superiority in these questions would assure him the command. But would the occasion offer ? And he was not sure that these fools would be disposed to recognize his superiority. One would see ! Meanwhile he belched Marx, and called Bouchard a little bourgeois because his mouth was always full of Proudhon, that clodhopper ! Bouchard, who could not take things lightly, spluttered for a moment, and then let fly ; and then there began between

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them, playing to the gallery, a battle of violent words, one against the other, and both against Society. They seemed to think themselves Danton and Robespierre disputing with the Convention, for the heads of others and their own. But Véron was not such a fool as to believe it. One had to be Bouchard to take everything seriously. And the more Bouchard talked and got carried away, the deeper he sank into his gulf of gravity. The spoken word did not relieve him, as it does many who let their fire go up in smoke ; it involved him further : it was the cry that braces the muscles and raises the fist, as with primitive natures. Véron took a diabolical pleasure in watching him furiously spit himself on the *picador's* lance. He cheered him on, and if at the same time the bull could floor the *picador*, that beetle hampered by its shards, so much the better. A fine sight ! Véron did not refuse to enter the arena, to watch at closer quarters. He could not be accused of having cold feet. He was among the violent instigators of the Jaurés demonstration at the beginning of April ; and he took part in it.

Marc had let Bouchard drag him to some of the meetings of Socialist revolutionary students. He attended irregularly, out of curiosity rather than liking : with him, mental curiosity was a passion which he christened by the name of duty. He applied himself to reading Marx. But he did not read properly. He skipped. His undisciplined individualism jibbed at the implacable necessity of that historic materialism. For all his efforts to tame his encroaching self by asceticism, the self snorted. It would only touch the Marxist field with the tip of a disdainful nose. This humiliating pre-eminence of the "economic" over the "psychic" revolted him. Yet he and his mother had been forced to learn what it costs to come up against the "economic", and that it has to be allowed for. But he and his mother were among the romantics—shall we call them obsolete or eternal ?—whose real end in life is to vindicate their independent soul against all the fatalities that oppress it. It is not said that they ever succeed, in any place,

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or at any time. But they will it. They would not be themselves if they did not. And for them it suffices that they do so will, though they be vanquished. Even if Fate exterminates their will, Fate has to take it into account ; it is a fact which may perhaps prove as enduring as Fate itself. Marc was not in a fit state to read books which did not reflect his own desires. His eyes were hostile. He was still far from the high objective spirit, attained by the maturity of seasoned fighters in presence of the enemy. He would not hear the adversary to the end ; he interrupted and said : "No !"

But there was more : it was not only the opposite view that he refused to study in order to be well acquainted with what he had to combat. It was all thought that required an effort to grasp it. He was suffering from brain-fag ; his mind was feverish, he could fix it on nothing. He began to read twenty things at once, and finished none of them. At the end of the first chapter, his mind was off on a fresh track. There were so many criss-crossing each other, that anyone seeing his mind laid bare, would have seen a mad dog rushing round making figures of eight in a forest, tearing and knocking itself, till it fell on its side, with red sparks dancing in its eyes. He envied the angry obstinacy of Bouchard, and the discipline of Ruche, indifferent, and ruled (so it seemed) like a sheet of music ; they did what they were doing, the rest could wait its turn. But he did not want to be like them. He pitied Bouchard, toiling and fuming over his furrow. Ruche's mocking punctuality irritated him. He could not imagine her making love ; but when she did it would be at the minute marked on her time-table, and with the same indifference. He felt like throwing her to the foot of his bed. (For the somnambulist, while thinking of her, had just put her in it. God be praised ! She was not there. . . .) But the bed was empty and his brain full. When girls are not in the one they are in the other. They jostle the ideas. Raging, Marc endured them. Delivered over to his instincts during the war he had known woman too early and too crudely ; there had

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been nothing to restrain him, no reserve, no veil ; he had been thrown, weak and burning, into physical contact, as into a vat of boiling lead. He had emerged burned and wounded. It left a raw wound. The lance of desire remained deep in his flesh, and the giddiness and terror of voluptuousness. His system, with nerves vibrating like a violin, quivered at the least pressure. His precociously sharpened intelligence made him aware of the danger, which he confided to no one. He had been so much alone, and for so long, that he thought that a real man ought to keep his dangers to himself and defend himself unaided. That was why, let loose in Paris, with no moral restraint whatever, he avoided sexual encounters like fire. He was afraid—not of the other—but of himself. He did not know if he would be able to control himself afterwards. He knew too well that he would not. With no inclination to asceticism, and morally treating it with withering derision, he forced himself to it, he was constrained to do so. And he hid it. Nobody suspected it (except the eyes of Ruche). And also he was proud and tyrannical, like so many who are jealous of their own independence : they are also jealous of the dependence on their caprice of those around them. He wanted what he loved all to himself. He was not so simple as not to know that he would not get it. (And what would he do with it if he had it?) Then he said : "All or nothing. . . . Nothing." Nothing until the next explosion !

✓Tolstoy maintains that the flesh assails those who nourish it too well. Marc would have had an answer to that ! There were few days when he had enough to eat. The fire burns all the better in empty stomachs.

He saw his little store of money dwindling rapidly ; and to his shame he was not able to replenish it. He had supposed that he would be well able to support himself by his own exertions, and that a sober, active, intelligent young man in Paris could always earn the little that was strictly necessary. But one must suppose that even that little is too much : he earned nothing. And moreover could he be contented with

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it? He would deny himself heroically for five days; but on the sixth he could resist no more, the boiler exploded; and in a quarter of an hour he threw away a whole week's money. A boy is too tempted! He would be a monster if he had no temptations—a monster and a half if he did not sometimes yield to temptation. Marc was certainly not a monster, nor a monster and a half. He yielded. And afterwards he was invariably heartbroken, less on account of his weakness than of his absurdity. He was amazed at the uselessness or foolishness of what he had desired. What does one possess—being or object—a moment after one has possessed it? Nothing in one's hands, nothing in one's heart! Everything has fled. Then he would inflict upon himself—a very bad remedy—another period of austerity. Naturally, he exploded once more, raging. And if he knew how to lose his money, he had no talent for earning any. He had not the suppleness of spine to open the way to profit for himself. Annette's son had not received that gift from nature. He held stoutly to the anachronistic conviction—the hard knocks of life had not had time to make him unbend—of the social value of the intellectual; and he would have thought it unworthy to derogate from it; vainly he displayed his certificates, and his bit of learning to be disregarded. Who cared about it?

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at the expense of millions of other candidates for existence. Marc knew it. No son of those fierce years could be ignorant of it. But if all—except those who are marked for death—have accepted the combat, there are still a certain number (God be praised !) who strive to maintain a spirit of chivalry. If they heard the word, they would protest : they would be afraid of ridicule. But only words are out of fashion. The spirit maintains, under every fashion, the imperishable armour of its great virtues and its great vices. A Marc would have been Marc, even in the days of the Merovingians ; and he will remain Marc to the end of time.

Therefore, he would not go and ask for money—even imperatively—from a Véron, whom he despised in his heart. He even hesitated to accept, at their meetings in Ruche's room, a ticket for theatres, concerts, or exhibitions of which Véron's pockets were always full, and which cost him nothing. However, some programmes put his “non-acceptance” to the test, and he hid it badly. Ruche saw it ; she was amused at these secret struggles between a pride, jealous of its independence, and a childish longing for the amusement offered : both feelings were familiar to her, and it made Marc seem a little nearer to her. Once she gave herself the maternal pleasure—another old-fashioned word, which she would have repudiated—of accepting from Véron a concert ticket which had made Marc's eyes gleam with a longing, angrily repressed ; and when she was alone with him, she remembered that she could not use the ticket, and passed it on to him : he had no reason to refuse it from her. It was not till Marc was in his seat at the concert that a suspicion crossed his mind as to whether Ruche had really accepted the ticket for herself ; she who cared about as much for music as for the rain beating on her window panes. He was so touchy that the thought spoilt his pleasure for the evening. Another would have been grateful to Ruche. Marc was vexed that he had betrayed himself before her.

He began to think that, taking it all round, it would be less humiliating if he were obliged to do so, to accept money from

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Sylvie than presents from other people. But after having refused it, there was no glory in having to ask for it. And though his purse had been empty since the night before, he held out, his heart sinking more than his stomach. As luck would have it, Sylvie passing in her car that afternoon, caught sight of him, with her quick eye like a magpie's on a branch, and hailed him. He had to hold himself down not to leap into the car. He leapt all the same ! But he had the satisfaction of feeling that, at least, immediately after, he recovered his air of condescension, as he listened to the chatterbox ; and when she had told him all her news, and bethought herself of inquiring into her nephew's affairs :

"And you know, money rains in on me ; do you want any ? I've got too much ! "

He had answered in his most unconcerned and rather conceited manner :

"Oh ! Good Lord ! if you like ! I can find a use for it."

She replied :

"Scamp ! You had much better come and enjoy yourself with me."

But she crammed his pockets. When he tried to kiss her, she showed him a spot at the top of her cheek where it would not spoil her make-up. She pinched his chin—she thought he looked paler, rather hollow-cheeked, handsome, more knowing-looking : he had not wasted his time since he had been let loose in the field.

"Promise that you will come ! Now then, promise ! "

He said, with the impertinence of Cherubim :

"Promised ! You have paid in advance."

She pushed away his face, marked with the traces of her two thumbs :

"Wretch !" she said, laughing. "Come all the same ! You'll see ! I never pay till afterwards."

He waited till the car had gone, to go and devour a slice of underdone meat at the nearest restaurant. His adaptive stomach caught up with the two lost meals that night. And

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he thought that just now Sylvie looked as beautiful as a devil. What fire in her eyes ! And what perfume ! He licked it on his lips.

Yet he was in no hurry to keep his promise. He still turned a deaf ear when a fortnight later he received an abrupt reminder from his aunt :

" Youngster ! What about your debt ? "

Ah ! no, she would get nothing out of him if she asked like that. But every day, especially when he read in the Perfume-King's Press that the pretty perfumeress had given a princely entertainment in her salons, to the masters of finance and politics, flanked by their females, and escorted by their buffoons of art and the press, with dancing, music, and acting, of the the first flight, he longed to go and see it all. What harm could it do him ?

IX

It cost him a good deal more than he would confess to himself. He did not want to own it, but he could not ignore it. He knew that he was in danger. He was like the young Hercules at the parting of the ways ; and if even Hercules chose that of spindle and pillow, there was little hope that a lost child in Paris, with Omphale beckoning at every street corner, should choose that of renunciation. Marc's eyes measured the pleasure and pain, the lofty peaks which he would have to scale ; and at the very first step he felt so weary ! His head reeled, his limbs ached, an insidious languor weakened his legs. Like all the young men around him, he knew the lure of the depths, the gulf of oblivion—oblivion the strongest enticement of sensuality ! Oh ! to escape from one's self, evade the task. . . . " Who imposes it on me ? The fate of these inhuman times ? Did I ask to live in them ? I reject it ! I cannot. This fate is myself. I alone command myself to climb upwards. But what hope of reaching the heights ? And when, after exhausting struggles, I have climbed up, worn out,

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drained of my substance, what shall I find ? Shall I find anything ? Or on the other side of the sharp ridge, nothingness ? "

Nothingness and death everywhere ! This War which is said to be over (it is still going on) has encircled space with its barrage of asphyxiating gases. It blocks the horizon. It is the fact—the only one which imposes itself on these young men. All the ideologies that deny it, or if they cannot, try to celebrate it, are rotters, faces to be slapped. I bash them on the jaw ! The War is there. Its claws are in my neck, its putrefying breath in my nostrils. If I wish to live I must free myself and fly, or else pass through it. To pass through it is to know what lies beyond. To know, to be able ! Will one be able ? And to fly is a baser form of knowing. To know that the battle is lost. Devil take the hindmost ! A Marc Rivière can only fly by crossing the enemy's lines. Fly forward ! He repeated it to himself so as to be quite sure—but was he sure ? All around him was a helter-skelter of men, old and young, taking to their heels.

A rush for the exit—dancing, sport, travelling, smoking parties, females, pleasure, gambling, oblivion—flight, flight.

There were twenty ways of flying. And not two in twenty who had the honesty to own that they were a flight. One must be very strong to despise oneself, and despising oneself, keep the impulse to live ! The most distinguished, like Adolphe Chevalier, evoked the refuge of art and the fields. . . . The First Eclogue (the Second also). . . . Ah ! what a good example was set by one vanquished like themselves, the gentle post-War Virgil, after-dinner singer of the conscriptors, the new rich (O irony ! that this should be the shade whose soft hand the stern Dante chose to guide him !) The Mantuan could at least invoke his : "*Deus nobis haec otia . . .*" But for the young Tityri and Corydons of to-day no *Deus* has come. And they would have needed a strong dose of illusion to imagine that the next upheaval of the old world would forget in their cosy corners, those who try to forget it, by hypnotizing themselves like the hen before the chalk line, at the gaming table

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of Art, where the croupier is the emasculated æstheticism, whose white hands, dirty hands, would take care not to commit themselves to action—or those who think that the old hearth, the ancient roof-tree of tradition, the secular domestic rural life, which could shelter their fathers, will still be able to protect them from the assaults of the tempest. As if the tempests to come will leave a single main wall standing ! Who to the players on the flute, who withdraw from the arena before the battle is decided ! Whatever the issue of the battle the conqueror will trample them under foot. And their songs will come to dust. But perhaps they secretly presume that the Deluge will wait till they have finished playing on the sands before it comes to sweep them away ? It is enough for them to enjoy the quarter of a day which remains for them. They cheat their lives.

Let them, at least, have the frank cynicism to say so ! "To-morrow I will be dead. To-morrow I will have no mouth, I have but to-day. I eat." But they are always striving to find one or another (no matter which) ideological justification for themselves. Why this sham ? Because the intellectuals who abdicate have to hide their abdication from themselves with reasons—unless they preach it up with reasons. They can do nothing without reasons. Their instinct has forgotten how to walk alone. Cowardly or brave, they must always have a "wherefore". And when one is wanted it can always be found. The fugitives of 1919 have never lacked wise and profound motives for deserting the field.

Marc despised those who fled. He despised them with a violence which was a defence against his own temptation to fly. And as he trembled beforehand lest he might not be able to resist it, he reserved a semblance of excuse for himself, by limiting his implacability to the fugitives who told lies, to those who endeavoured to gild their flight. The law of truth of the clan of the Seven : "Be what you like ! Do what you like ! Fly if you like ! But say : 'I fly !'"

They did not say it. Even the Seven were beginning to

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equivocate. First, Adolphe Chevalier pleaded exception, *ore rotundo* in virtue of the duty of "*accommodation to the real*", to withdraw to his estate. "Shift for yourselves! I shift for myself. I am a *realist*." (A word which made its fortune in those days. It allowed people to go about their business, while pretending to infuse into the country the new blood of a healthy and virile political pragmatism, opposed to the empty ideology of former generations. Yet the ideology of those generations never prevented the knowing ones from making their pile !)

Véron and Bouchard riddled Chevalier's virtuous Georgic, and overwhelmed him with their sarcasm. But they were cheating too. All their noisy talk about Revolution was a game that dispensed them from action. When they vociferated among their pals for hours, pulverizing Society; when they thrashed out a vigorous plan for a future demonstration they were playing with tin soldiers.

The only one who recognized the situation without trying to disguise it was Sainte-Luce, from whom Marc least expected such frankness. He was preparing in the two Schools of Political Science and Oriental Languages, for his career in the diplomatic service. But he had no intention of binding himself. He made no secret of the fact that evasion was his aim. Instead of seeking it outside the machine, whose straps and steam-hammers make short work of catching you, he intended to find it at the heart. To dig his hole in the very centre of the hurricane. And from there to see, know, act and enjoy, without attachment to anything. Lucid and free, to escape the universal servitude, by cynically exploiting the interests of the masters of the day, and tricking them—but without ambition or lucre, only trying to seize the instant without ever allowing it to seize him, and ever ready to abandon it, and his life: for beings of his kind are detached from everything and from themselves. Ephemeræ who dance in the whirlwind of the moment.

He did not condescend to explain himself to his comrades,

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who were ironical at his expense. Véron said with brutal good humour :

“ Are you selling yourself ? ”

And Bouchard answered Véron :

“ The prostitute follows her natural bent.”

And Adolphe the wealthy was disdainfully silent, he could not understand how anyone could alienate his liberty to the State. And Marc was silent also, but there was no offence in his silence, for he partly guessed the reasons of the subtle feline young man, who would not take the trouble to defend himself. What use was it ? But conscious of the attraction (mingled with repulsion) which he exercised over Marc, Luce said to him, pointing to the three augurs, with his charming smile that brought the dimple to his cheek :

“ Which of us will be the first to betray ? ”

And immediately, laying his caressing hand on Marc’s, he added :

“ But the last will be you.”

Marc drew his hand away, growling. Praise to him was an affront. Luce’s eyes caressed him. He knew that Marc despised him ; but contempt from Marc did not offend him, there was no insult in it ; and of all his comrades, Marc was the one whose right to contempt Luce recognized : for Luce judged that he was the only one who played, and would play, straight to the end. Bouchard, too, perhaps ? But his brutal frankness did not interest Luce. The young aristocrat only felt himself the “ fellow ” of a man with a mind as clear and fine as his own, where the live thought showed on the surface. Though Marc’s character might be opposed and hostile to his, they were on a par. And Marc felt it too. He was obliged to acknowledge angrily to himself that Sainte-Luce was closer to him than all the others—the only one that was close to him. He let Luce take his arm and confide to him what he confided to no other : all the sly young Machiavellism of his experience, incomplete, but precociously sharp and disillusioned. And Marc was not disgusted by it. He had himself but too much

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innate knowledge of these tempting instincts. In him the blood of Annette was mingled with that of the Brissots. When one despises men is it not legitimate to make use of them and their stupid idols? The Brissots had always been masters at the game; they were so broken into it that one could swear that they were taken in themselves! But no fear! The legion of Brissots know how to withdraw their stake in time—their stakes—a whole pile. Oh! Marc knew them well! They were in his blood. He would sometimes feel a furious longing to cheat the "*Volpone*". But he would act badly; he was too excessive, he would never resist the itch to show his contempt in the middle of his part; and in the end, after trampling on others, he would trample on himself. Saint-Luce had the right dose of contempt, laughing, amiable, human—pleasing men (for contempt does please them when it is good form and the dose is moderate).

The strangest thing was that by a contradiction which he could not explain, Marc in his heart was possessed by the idea of saving them. He would not admit it; and when Luce said it he was irritated. But when Luce, ironical and courteous, added :

"No? You are the best judge. If you say no, we will say it too." He was too truthful not to say "Yes". Mustn't one be stupid! To save, to save others, when one has so much to do to save oneself, and when the others do not care a bit that you should save them. Marc knew this quite as well as Luce. But he could not help it; he was like that. It was the conflicting forces of his nature. And that which he had from his mother might be mistaken; but it held him by the navel. And—let him be frank—he held to it. If he would be ashamed to expose it to the irony of the others, in his secret heart he was proud of it—prouder of that error than of the contrary truths. It made him care to live. It held his chin above the foam. Without it he would have nothing but himself, himself alone, no interest but himself—the ardour to know, doubtless, and to see, and to take, and to be—but for himself alone. . . .

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Alone ! It is terrifying ! It takes more than the strength of a boy of twenty to bear it without convulsions. Luce bore it because he did not think about it, he forbade himself to think of it, he would not stop to look into the depths, he fled, fled on the surface.

Marc could not fly, in any circumstances. Neither in pleasure nor in pain. The depths arose from the sea, like the volcanic islets projected by internal fires, which go down again in the perpetual quivering of the abyss. The ground he camped on was undermined. That is why his eyes sought, outside himself, for a hand—the hands of men to catch hold of. . . . That they might save him ? No, he knew well that he had nothing to expect from them. To save them ! Even when it is known for an illusion, the thought of having charge of souls, peoples our solitude, and lends a tenfold energy to generous natures.

"Play your part !" said Luce indulgently. "I will be the audience."

"An audience like you," said Marc bitterly, "would be enough to kill the piece."

"You must have an audience though."

"Then it will be myself. I will be the audience, the actor, and the piece. I know, I know that I am the stuff that dreams are made of !"

"It is something to know it !" acquiesced Luce, exchanging a look of understanding with him. "It is more than our comrades will ever suspect."

X

However, they let themselves be enrolled in the demonstration of the first Sunday in April.

Men's minds were under high pressure in those days. The criminal acquittal of the assassin of Jaurès—that second assassination—during the month of March, had been a blow to the young men. The sap of violence rose in the heart of Paris,

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with that of spring. Even the quietest of the students, the little Christian lambs, bleated for the Good Shepherd of Revolution. Even the shepherds of the Bucolics played marching *ritornelli* on their flageolets : " *Formez vos bataillons !*" Even Adolphe, who on his own account could only contemplate action—passion also, according to spiteful tongues—pen in hand before his writing-table, resigned himself to joining the ranks of the mob, whose promiscuity was offensive to his delicacy. It would not do to look like backing out the first time they were acting—feigning action—and there might be danger in it.

So six out of seven of them—the indifferent Ruche, knowing beforehand what to expect, had stayed at home—met in Avenue Henri Martin, in the midst of a jubilant crowd. Strange commemoration of a great man, who died defeated not once but twenty million times, defeated in the twenty million assassinated by the war, like himself, basely killed from behind by his enemies, and basely betrayed by his friends ! And under the bust of Jaurès was the vacillating indecision of Anatole France. Guided by an infallible instinct, Chevalier, with Bette on his arm, had slipped through the crowd towards the old man, whose presence in this funereal *kermesse* reassured his mind. And in that surge of passers-by whose faces and cries were puzzling and distant to him, the old man was well pleased to find Bette, rosy and radiant, on whose mouth his eyes could rest. He saw her as she was, fresh and soft, as silly as one could wish, very restful to the mind. But among the most excited groups, in the front ranks, Véron held Bouchard, barking on the leash, and he waited for the moment to let him loose. Within a few feet Sainte-Luce and Marc stood elbow to elbow, exchanging ironical remarks, and missing nothing of the spectacle. And though he did not know it, Marc was part of the spectacle to Luce : for he saw him suddenly shaken by the fits and starts of the crowd. He might mock them bitterly ; but he was their bedfellow. They made him share their thrills. Sainte-Luce perceived in his com-

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panion's face, contractions, hard gleams, the angry quiver of the nostrils, the set jaws, and under the chin, the flood of agglutinated fury, which he swallowed with his saliva. Like a brother, Luce watched for the squall, ready to save him from any imprudence, and he knew how to ease the compressed steam by opening the safety-valve of a burst of laughter, at some unexpected sally. He said to himself that such a face was an oceanograph of the submarine currents of the crowd. One could read the storm in it a few seconds beforehand.

And suddenly Luce read the tornado there. Before he had time to realize it around them came the cracking of revolver shots. The police were charging the anarchists, who with their black flag unfurled, fell upon Guichard's men, striking them with cudgels, and pelting them with pieces of broken iron railings. Sainte-Luce and Marc were swept along with the flood ; in an instant they were thrown into the centre of the fray ; and still pushed along, they broke through the police cordon. As they rushed past they had seen the flash of knife-blades, and bleeding faces. And in front of them Bouchard, battering the stomach of a police Goliath with his head. As they went down the Champs-Elysées, their diminished band formed into a column again ; but Chevalier had disappeared. "Hey presto !" He had managed, in the nick of time, to hoist himself and his companion on to Anatole's perch, to be his bodyguard. At the bottom of the imperial avenue, fresh battles awaited the demonstrators ; their force now was not equal to the number of the enemy. The company was obliged to break up, and try to get back into Paris in small groups, by one of the side-streets, with a view to assembling again in the Place de l'Opéra. Marc saw Véron throw his revolver into the mouth of a drainpipe as he passed ; and Véron who caught Marc's look said, laughing :

"It has a right to rest. It has worked."

But Bouchard refused to get rid of a long knife that bulged his pocket, and which he exhibited out of mere bravado ; for his heavy fists were sufficient for him.

Sainte-Luce had never let go of Marc's arm, and Marc was too occupied to notice the grapnel, which he hated ; he was pale and excited, talking aloud, and never noticed that the wise pilot at the wheel was turning the boat to the left, and taking him over the flower-beds of the avenue, making for an exit. He was as pleased as a child to feel the forbidden grass under his feet, and he wanted to stop and pick a branch of chestnut in flower. But the police had foreseen the side movement, and precipitated the helter-skelter. Whether they liked it or not, general dignity had to give way to anxiety for individual safety ; they had to take to their heels. Near the Madeleine at the end of a narrow street the four companions, followed by the few survivors of the column—" *rari nantes*"—came up against a wave of plain-clothes police, who attacked them with fury. The *mélée* was short but savage, Marc had just time to see Bouchard, who was flinging himself against a bunch of policemen, rolling on the ground on one of them, with one on the top of him, and trampled under their heels. Véron's vast coffer resounded like a drum under the fists that belaboured him—and Marc was pulled by the arm so suddenly that he staggered and nearly fell, he saw a mass of steel—a sword hilt—come down near his face, which was grazed by it, and found himself a few steps off, still held fast by Sainte-Luce, who had just saved him from a fatal blow. They fled, pursued through a network of streets, forming a spider's web around the boulevard. The shutters of the shops were being hastily closed. Marc could not see, the blood was running over his eyebrows, and his head was buzzing. He heard the pursuers shouting behind him. He let himself be dragged along by Sainte-Luce, who never hesitated, sure of his way. After taking one or two turnings at the corner of a street, Luce drummed like a rabbit on the closed shutters of a milliner's shop : he called :

" Anie ! "

Immediately up went the iron panel that closed the lower part of the door : Luce pushed Marc in and followed him on all

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fours. Women's hands seized the boys by the ears and pulled them in. The iron panel fell back behind them. They were on their knees in the dark. A policeman was shouting outside banging on the shutters. Marc, trying to get up, heard a laughing whisper against his cheek, saying : "Hush!" and his hands, seeking support, caught hold of two round thighs at the turn of the knee. They kept silent and still, the girls smothering their laughter. A whistle imperatively recalled the persistently banging policeman ; cursing, he was obliged to rejoin the main body of the army : there the battle was still raging, and they had other fish to fry. Then Marc, whose fevered brain was cooling, perceived that he was on his knees in the dark, against a girl on her knees, and that a warm mouth, which smelt of amber, was pressed to his without ado, and said : "Good day!" He said : "Good night!" And she laughed and said :

"And now suppose we take a look at each other."

They got up and lighted up, not electric light, but a candle, whose long smoky flame was shaded by the hollow of a hand. They were introduced. There were two of them : Ginette and Melanie, two sisters, seventeen and twenty. The elder a brunette, the younger red-haired, with a milk-white skin ; both made up, of course ; little laughing lines at the corners of their bright, dilated eyes, and faces like little weasels, held forward. Melanie was Sainte-Luce's mistress, probably Ginette also. Whatever one has, either good or bad, is shared by the family. There was much talking and laughing. They both said the same thing at the same time, or repeated it one after the other, in the same words, both laughing more than ever, as if the second time was the best. They clapped their hands, rejoicing in the adventure, and their good luck in having been on their stool peeping through a crack in the shutter when Luce had knocked to escape the pursuers! And to flavour their joy with a shiver, they convinced themselves that the "Coppers" would come back presently to make a search.

"While awaiting the scaffold," said Sainte-Luce, "let's drink the last glass!"

And he sang :

"To die for Melanie is the sweetest fate."

But Ginette, who was quite ready for somebody to die for her too, was puzzled as she watched Marc's face, turned away with vexation. They had a little dinner together ; and Marc at last, softened to the extent of letting her put bits into his mouth ; he even licked Ginette's fingers which were smeared with chocolate. But Ginette squealed ; the little dog had bitten her ! He apologized, ashamed, and got up saying that he would go home. But the other three protested. There was still a commotion in the street, and it was dangerous. Ginette slipped through the half-opened door, and went to reconnoitre. She came back, and declared that the police were guarding every exit of the little city. Marc was unconvinced of her veracity, and persisted in going. They would not let him. The scratch on his cheek would betray him at the first glance. And Ginette noticed that his coat was torn on the shoulder. She made him take it off, so that she could mend it for him. In taking it off, they discovered between the tears of the shirt in ribbons, that his shoulder was red, blue, green, and bruised. Why hadn't he said so ? It was an opportunity for Ginette and Melanie to display their skill in first aid. They revelled in it.

There was no further question of leaving that night. They set about making arrangements for camping. In the back shop, about the size of a large cupboard, and with no windows, there was a divan bed, which they divided, the mattresses on the floor. It was war-time ! "And now choose yours !" Marc, abominably embarrassed, irritated and disgusted, sought some way of getting out of it. But there was none. The two hostesses offered themselves, quite simply, and frankly. What could be more natural ? He could not possibly make himself disagreeable to these kind girls, and play the Joseph : the part was not to his taste ! There was no way of explaining himself.

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Luce, who had made his choice, seeing Marc's embarrassment, said like a good comrade :

" Would you like to change ? "

Marc felt like slapping his face. Furious and ashamed, he helped Ginette to turn the mattress. The little girl whispered in his ear :

" It doesn't matter ! If you don't want to, we can just pretend ; we can each sleep on our own side."

He was touched. They put out the light. " Each sleep on our own side " ; it was easily said ! There was no room to lie side by side. By stretching out a hand one could touch the other bed, where the two others had lost no time in beginning. Ginette excused herself humbly :

" I am ugly."

He said :

" No ! " with conviction, that was not the reason. She tried to understand. She supposed that he loved someone else, and wanted to be faithful to her. He took care not to undeceive her. She thought it fine. She was not used to these scruples. She chattered away on the pillow, puerile, touching, vicious, but still honest. Marc could not help his mouth almost touching the corner of her chattering lips, and tasting as they moved their bitter-sweet almond savour. And his least movement unmuzzled the spirits of the earth. Naturally, it was at the very instant that he energetically cried " No ! " that they cried " Yes ! " And afterwards he was indignant and disgusted with himself. She was delighted, and still believing that he was thinking of the lady-love to whom he had been false, said, trying to console him : " She won't know anything about it." But he could not stand it any longer ! The air of that hole choked him. She got up, humbly, to open the shop door for him secretly, while the others were asleep. As he crept out through the cat-hole, he kissed her knees.

He found himself outside in the cold April night, drenched with sweat, his mind feverish and wandering. He felt powerless to fight against the call of his awakened senses. And there

Véron jeered at it. He had not even been mauled. Asked how he had managed it, he boasted that he had greased the coppers' paws : at the police station the name of his bank had been a better guarantee than if he had produced the credentials of a deputy. As to Bouchard, the fool had let himself be nabbed. One shouldn't get nabbed. So much the worse for him ! People should know what they are risking.

" And what do you risk ? " said Marc, rudely.

Véron laughed in his face, and said with boasting cynicism :

" Your skin. Whenever you like ! "

But he felt that he had gone too far and added good-humouredly :

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"After all, the Sorbonards have done him a service by spewing him out. Anyone who wants to make his fortune and hasn't got cold feet, has only got to stoop down and pick it up."

"One needs the right sort of back for that," said Marc dryly.

"If it isn't, life's cudgel will soon make it so," said Véron.

They turned their backs on each other—Good-bye !

Adolphe Chevalier had not reappeared. But there was no need to worry about him. He had gone to visit his estates. He was reading Montaigne. What more could be asked of him ? Eyes open—mouth shut. A free mind and no risks. And a backside well in the warmth. The cleric cannot be accused of playing false. Let others compromise their minds with action.

Ruche's menagerie was deserted. When Marc went there he found himself *tête à tête* with her ; he did not know what to say to her. Her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands, she pierced him with her eyes, smiling strangely ; she seemed to be waiting. . . . For what ? He was irritated. But the brusquer he was, the sharper grew her smile ; he could not succeed in relaxing the hard little eyes, searching in his field. She seemed changed in some way, or changing. But he was not sufficiently interested in her to waste time trying to understand her. And it annoyed him that she should allow herself to understand him. For though he said to himself : "She can't know anything about me. My door is shut to her," he did not feel at all sure that she was not peeping through the keyhole. Then he stopped short in the middle of a sentence, got up, and casting an angry glance at her, impolitely walked out. She never budged. When he was in the street, he thought to himself that if he were to go up again and open the door, at any moment, to-night, or in a week's time—his eyes would meet her gimlet eyes between the half-closed lids, at the other side of the table, and her ironical mouth emitting a thin thread of blue smoke from the lighted cigarette between her long fingers. He stamped his foot in the street, and swore it would be a long day before he went there again ! But like a cross child he felt a

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raging longing to open the insolent creature, with her bold eyes, as one opens a shell-fish with a knife to see what was inside.

His loneliness increased and also the fire under his skin, lit by the bittersweet skin of the little night-bird. He spent several days in a state of mental and physical unrest, unable to find his way again. He forced himself to work as one flings oneself into the water ; but the water rejected the waif. No strength left ! No pleasure in anything. Doing, thinking ? What ? What was the use ? Hour by hour the gap in his will grew larger and sucked him in. He felt as if two great avid lips were stuck to his side. His substance was drained away, his energy was going. . . . The irresistible incline. . . . Flight, flight. . . . No ! He clung to the edge with his nails. If I fall, I shall never come up again ! The torrent is at the bottom. Though he shut his eyes he could hear it, and under his nails the patter of falling sand, the stone was giving way. He did not let go ; it let him go.

And one night Sylvie walked in and with a tap of her heel sent the stone rolling down, with the spider hanging to it.

"Now then, out of this ! I'm going to carry you off ! You've wasted enough time ! And don't tell me that you save it by yawning ! You were yawning, yep. I caught you at it. Well, in my house you'll have something to yawn for. All the newest and most expensive Ennus of the Quat'z-Arts—(there are a score at least !) If you want to see the Comedy—(*Tutt'è burla !*)—I will give you the key of the wings. The best actors are not always on the stage, nor the worst either. To learn to play your part in the farce, someday, see, see, see, see ! He is king who sees ! "

XI

She took him to her hotel in the Avenue d'Antin—her little Louvre, where King Coquille sat enthroned. In spite of the Salic law, the queens of France have held the sceptre more than once. She held it, and left the spindle to her Coquille, who

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slept upon his scented renown, in the midst of his court. He thought himself the inspiration of his epoch. He was surrounded by women, intriguers and artistes, who flattered him, made fun of him and pocketed his money, while he claimed that he had supplied them with ideas, insight and beauty. For he dabbled comically in all the arts. He gave advice to painters who dumped their striped canvases and geometrical problems on him. He might be seen lost in contemplation before negro idols in his garden. He discovered beauties green and not intact, over-ripe talents, dried fruit, Hindoo dancers, the inspired of Mènilmontant or the *swamis* of Montauban. He was as unctuous as his creams and servilely familiar with a *clientèle* of great ladies, who never paid, and two or three crowned heads—discrowned—who having to choose between head and head-covering, had preferred to lose their hats. He had also his word to say in politics, and he contemplated, encouraged by the flatterers who milked him the worst, the acquisition of a great newspaper in which he could let the world hear the word. What word? He would have been sorely puzzled to write it down, or even to know what it was. But the gentry of the inkpot whom he maintained undertook to manufacture it for him.

As to the queen, she reigned over the dressmaking and the fêtes, whose mad extravagance, supplied the gossip of Paris. She was not sorry to have her nephew for her own minister of recreations and pleasures, or more simply, informer in the fine arts—the minor arts in their relation to the major Art of Amusement. For she did not know much about the fine arts; she had but her natural taste and her instinct. It was a good deal: it was enough to enable her to make ludicrous blunders now and then which the infatuation of the day mistook for witty archness. But the infatuation of the day is the criticism of the morrow. Sylvie made no mistake about it, she felt the ground giving way under her feet. She was well pleased to lean on Marc. He came, mistrustful, allured. And as was to be expected in that furious carnival of pleasure and shamelessness

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in which art, love, intrigue and folly were mingled, he lost his footing at the first step. He had meant to lay down for himself the impossible rule, at his age, of being an unmoved spectator, who meant to see everything without being caught, so as to make himself master of life : a Julien Sorel, emaciated by long fasting, who grew giddy with two fingers of wine. His brain began to dance at the first few drops.

Sylvie expected it. She did nothing to betray him, but neither did she do anything to defend him. She watched his struggles out of the corner of her eye ; she was amused by them, they pleased her, in him she recognized her proud Annette, and secretly she revenged herself for the mother on the son.... “*La tour prends garde !*” Brave little tower ! It stuck up its quills inside its armour. Sylvie applauded chuckling. She waited for the end. She knew too well that the armour was cracking, and that one day all of a sudden, all the walls would be swept away. And she thought to herself : “ What can one do ? Whether one likes it or not, evil or good, one has to go through it. Let youth learn ! And at its own risk ! So much the worse if he leaves some of his wool on the bushes. The animal is good. He will come through it. The essential is that he should pass through it. He is no man who has not been through it.” She did not worry herself. It was Marc’s business. It would be doing him a bad turn to try and do it for him. She had her own business to attend to, both business and pleasure. No time to be lost ! She was using up her St. Martin’s summer.

So Marc was left to hold his own unaided against all that assailed him : pretty girls, featherbrains, adventurers, the whole fruit-salad piled up in the bowl. He was himself a green fruit that tempted more than one vermillioned mouth. He was also the nephew and great favourite of the Sultana ; they tried to get at her through him. He was not such a fool as not to know it. A suspicious youngster, he was more inclined than not to believe that people were trying to make use of him, that even the women, who pursued him shamelessly, were

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pieces? And the return to the forest? No, it is the expiration of the contract. Before renewing the lease, articles must be crossed out, and added. The old house, narrow and unhealthy, is falling to ruin. It must be rebuilt and enlarged.

✓ Sick humanity at these age crises, needs to rejuvenate its vitiated and impoverished blood, by dipping into its reserves of redoubtable animal energy. The soft fathers and the cowards whimper: "All is lost!" All is saved, or will be. But nothing for nothing! We must pay the price.

Marc was quite ready to pay the price. But was it not beyond his means? His mind was brave, too brave, it carried him beyond what the rest could withstand. He might see, judge, understand without weakness, but the brain is not an empyrean, it is connected with the stomach by all its juices, it is betrayed, it is delivered and delivers itself to the enemy.

Meanwhile, he defended himself. Heart and brain were revolted, and had starts of furious contempt against certain spectacles. He indulged in such insolence of speech that it made the perfume king choke in his cockle-shell, and made Petit Caporal Sylvie laugh inwardly and pull his ear, her police cap cocked on one side.

"Boor! Will you learn how to behave in Society!"

And he kicked: he retorted with hard truths. He was particularly indignant at the frantic waste of money on her fêtes. He said it was shameful when thousands had nothing to eat. Sylvie was not in the least disturbed. She said that the day before yesterday she had nothing to eat herself. To-day she was making up for lost mouthfuls. She answered cynically;

"Too much compensates for too little. Too much for some, too little for others. It makes the balance. And what do you expect, my boy? What is got by the flute returns to the drum. One must waste. . . ."

Marc, gave it her hot and strong, on her way of making money, as well as her way of spending it, on her luxury trade, in underwear and ointments, her hall for sexual intercourse and her exploitation of her customers at prices—robbery prices

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—as inordinate as the caprices of those mad insects—the fools of buyers ! Sylvie replied that if one had to live on the wisdom of mankind, and not on their idiocy, one might tighten one's belt ; and that when all was said and done, she and her Coquille made a living not only for themselves and her nephew ("A hit—dirty-nosed brat ! ") but for an army of employees. Marc, vexed, said stupidly :

" And what use is it ? "

" What ? "

" All you do ? All that they do ? "

❖ None, just to live. Is life any use ? We come out of the womb, we are born, we don't know why. We fill our stomachs, eat, love and exert ourselves, we don't know why. We die and go back to the I don't know what, we don't know why. There is only one thing that we know the reason of : we are bored ! And everything we do here below is for the sole purpose of forgetting that we are bored.✓

Marc was struck by this abruptly revealed bitterness. He saw the sudden weariness that slowed itself round the eyes, and in the lines of the overwrought mouth. The woman had betrayed herself in a moment of exhaustion. But she quickly recovered herself and straightened her backbone. She threw back the heavy luggage she dragged about with her into the van. She started on her campaign once more with her air of irony and defiance, shot with a gleam of irritation. That stupid nephew with his nonsense, who had made her chew the bitter herb again ! He was beginning to preach at her—" Show off, my boy ! Play the Cato ! Cato caught. The first comer will get you, and do what she likes with you. You need to have your crest lowered." She took up her frantic work and play once more.

Marc was not unjust to her. He knew very well that Sylvie never gave way to idleness. He saw her running business and pleasure in double harness ; she continued to work hard and to make her employees work ; she never drew rein. In reality she esteemed nothing but work—whatever the work might be .

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—and she despised the luxurious animals, the “do-nothings” whom she exploited ; she would have no scruples about fleecing them. In her, as in most of the daughters of the people of Paris, there was a substratum of *petroleuse* of the Commune, who at a given moment would soon make Society flare up and vigorously ! But they have no well-reasoned idea of organized Social Revolution. And a Sylvie would never hear of it. The little bourgeois and the *petroleuse* live happily together within her. The same petrol can serve to pour over the Cour des Comptes and to heat the oven. As to the logic of ideas, a Sylvie does not pride herself upon it. She is an anarchist by temperament who intends to do her own justice and injustice, for herself without interference from the State or anyone else. Morality is what she pleases. What pleases her is often, in its impudence, more right than the Law. She detested all the hypocritical farces of official and worldly benevolence, but without displaying it, she had her own active and precise benevolence, and she did not transfer it to anyone else. She was strict with her workers, for she would have no idlers on her staff ; but she watched over them and looked after their health : she had founded a rest and holiday home for them near Paris ; she married them off, and gave her favourites presents which were a small dowry ; better still, she won their confidence, she counselled and directed them—in her own fashion, immoral or moral, but always human, knowing what weaknesses demand but never letting them take more than their share. She would have done well to counsel herself also, and limit her own share of the fire.

But she arrogated to herself the privilege of special treatment. She trusted, a little too much, to her instinct and strength which she had been abusing with impunity for twenty years. Impunity cannot go on for ever. Sylvie ought to have felt the preliminary signs of the breaking up of her health. She did feel them. But she was used to taking risks. And then, there was in that fury of work and pleasure—as Marc had for a moment perceived—an underlying bitter indifference to

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her life without children, a grudge against the life, whose uselessness, she needed no little fool of a Marc to come and tell her. Then, die carcase ! But to your last breath, work and enjoy !

XII

The fêtes in Sylvie's hotel, dancing and smoking—were Lupercalia in little, at which Sylvie, plump and blooming in a low-cut dress, bare to the behind, as she said, wickedly made up, and finally, her brain reeling with cocktails, a real faun, set fire to everything around her. It was at one of these fêtes that Marc's reason took the final plunge. With his permanent fever of the marrow, it took very little to intoxicate him ! And sometimes the sense of his inferiority, instead of making him more prudent, excited him to bravado. He was drunk. His eyes swam, he could not see, he did not know what he was doing ; he was swept away in a whirl led by the goat-footed one ; his blood pounded in his ears like thunder, desire rumbled, his stupefied reason stumbled and fell. In the midst of the farandola he did not even know whose blood-red mouth was laughing against his. But he bit it. And a strange, savage jealousy flamed up in him. He lost consciousness and when he recovered it, he found himself lying in an underground room, in which he could still hear the hubbub and the music, alone, bewildered, unable to collect his thoughts. What had happened ? He could not remember ; he did not know whether he was remembering or inventing. And in what he invented fear was as active as desire. There were no more frontier limits between what had been and what might have been. By either he felt himself equally burnt, disgraced, and branded in his heart. And as he crept away, fearfully escaping from the indefatigable *kermesse* upstairs, ceaselessly rolling and unrolling its coils, he perceived the blood-red mouth and heard the throaty laughter of the she-devil by Jordæns. He fled into the night, shivering, ice and fire and his spirit scourged

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itself to blood without reaching either knowledge or regret. Hate and contempt, whatever it might be ! With fire and blood. But no forgetting. He was haunted. To punish himself he returned to his wretched student's lodging, his desert. He did not go back.

Sylvie was incapable of understanding the torment let loose in the boy's body. The next morning she did not feel the least embarrassment from the whirlwind of the previous night. She remembered clearly the sudden fury that leapt up in the boy's eyes, the gust of jealousy that made her bones crack, and set the mark of a bite on her lips. Full stop, that's all. It is both flattering and ludicrous. Sylvie was immune from all the trouble that she left in her wake, thanks to the assurance of her amoral nature, free from any innate vice, indifferent to conventions, just or unjust, the Gallic spirit, the ironical eye ever open to the burlesque of any situation. She had once seen old Sarah in Phèdre and she remembered Hippolyte. Oh ! the greenhorn ! Her own Hippolyte had run away in shame. She burst with laughter. Whatever did it matter ? Lord, what fools folks are at twenty ! And it is always the spirits who ride among the stars who make a world out of these nothings ! When one is bedfellow with the eternal ought one to worry about a rose-leaf between the sheets ! She winked at herself in the glass. The rose is full blown. She laughed, impartially at herself and him. The little slut also laughed at her dear sister Annette ! What would she say if she knew ? There was no danger of her knowing. Hippolyte *souri des portes de Trézène*, would sooner go and bury himself in the maw of the monster. "Run along, my Jonah !" She let him run. He would come back.

He did not come back. The obstinate boy hugged his rancour to him. He could not forgive his defeat. Not only the defeat of that night, the facts of which he would never find out. (And that was the worst sting ! For the other knew. What did she know ?) But the defeat of all the days which he had sold to that hostile world. (Hadn't he let himself be kept?) And worse than that, the defeat of the enjoyment he had

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experienced in that defeat. Those vermin, profiteers and prostitutes who lived on the misery of the world—and himself too, he had mixed with them ! He hurled the insult "prostitute" at himself, too. There was no excuse ! His weakness was none. He knew of it better than anyone. He had lied to himself when he said that he would be the stronger. He said it to himself at the very hour when he was playing false. He had played false by complicity with the secret desire which consumed him to enjoy that flower of depraved luxury, and all the fruit of a decaying world. He had justified it by the lying excuse of the right of the mind to see and know in order to fight better. Well, he had seen now—and he had seen himself ! And certainly none of it had been wasted. He had come back laden with spoils. But his own spoils were among them : " Marc the prostitute." He trampled upon him and the world with which he had had intercourse. He chastized himself. By a reaction of furious asceticism he took an oath to castrate all the traitorous instincts within himself that had delivered him to the enemy. He imposed upon himself a discipline of hard work, austere constraint, and total abstinence from women. To overcome his nature and to recast it by breaking it under the hammer. A very good way to accumulate within himself the rebellions of the violently repressed enemy ! But at that age, inhumanity is often the only way of salvation. For at that age, with boys of his stamp there is no choice between the two extremes. Marc chose that of the " Ironsides ". He encased his lean young body, burning with fever and weakness, in an implacable armour of renouncement. He wore it day and night against his skin. He even slept in it—so as not to sleep (*per non dormire . . . the grand device !*) to force himself to keep his eyes ever open.

Sylvie, who had informers in the Quarter, knew that he was in financial low water. She held out a pole to him. He rejected it. She persisted periodically for two or three months. So did he. He never answered her notes. She sent him a cheque, without a word. The last insult ! Money from her,

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now ! He crossed the cheque with an angry "Refused !" and sent it back by return of post. She had a good mind to go and pull his ears. The little idiot ! . . . She could see herself opening the door of his hole, going towards him, and he turning round, rage in his eyes, pale with astonishment, struck dumb. . . . It was just as well that she did not try ! Who knows which of the two mouths would have been struck dumb ? And cruel words might have been exchanged, difficult ever to wipe out.

But luckily, Sylvie was caught up again in her daily round. The machinery creaked. It was no longer in her power to stop it. It would have been prudent : two or three times great waves of blood had passed before her eyes. But Sylvie was not in the habit of wasting time over her ailments. On with the dance ! Her light foot started off again in the farandola. The farandola moved on. For six months Marc heard nothing of Dame Coquille, except through the newspapers.

She had completely forgotten him.

XIII

So Marc was once more as much alone as he could desire. If he was anxious to get along without counting upon anyone else, he would have his wish ! There was not a soul from whom he could expect so much as a radish. His mother was far away and had no money to send him. She had great trouble in getting her salary paid. They did not write much to each other. She was in a remote country place ; communications were difficult, and letters were fantastically delayed. Annette was going through the most critical weeks of her exile, caught in the noose. She would talk about it—if she ever did—when she had succeeded in getting out of it. Till then, not a word, like her son when he was caught in some snare. Mother and son were of strong fibre : "It's my own business ! Nobody has the right to poke his nose into my worries—" They only

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wrote a few vague, but vigorous lines to each other once a fortnight, just to say "I'm here!" They were more like letters between two comrades, than between mother and son. The firm hand of the clear-eyed woman grasped the quick ever feverish fingers of her boy. "Keep well! We're holding out!"

He never went to see Ruche again. The group of friends was broken up, scattered to the four winds. Each for himself!

He had come to the conclusion at last that he could not earn his bread by his brains. If he meant to live, he must come down. Any job whatever if the pay would enable him to hold out. It was a good deal to have come so far as to accept the idea! It was nothing. What question is there of accepting what nobody is offering you? The world laughs in your face: "You can keep your magnanimity. What do I want with you?" There were hundreds watching for any bone that was thrown out. Marc always arrived too late. And in the first jostles with the rest, he was still handicapped by some decency: he let those pass who were in front of him, or who slipped past him, or those who looked weak and deserving of pity, or on the contrary too impudent: because in that case he would have had to come to grips, and it disgusted him to dirty his hands on their greasy coat collars: sometimes a red fury rose in his brain: he was not afraid of the others but of himself. (The bully! "Hold me back!" No, irony had no place with this boy who felt himself suddenly swept away by interior waves, and had the agony of knowing that at such moments his will was powerless against them, and that he would go adrift. It would take time, and more than one perilous failure, before he could learn, not to hold them back—that would be exposing himself to destruction—but to direct them, by using them as fuel, driving power. Give him time! If he lives he may succeed some day. But to live, that was the problem! Would he be able to? And for how long? And how?)

He went the round of publishers and bookshops. After twenty vain attempts, he was taken on trial for night work in

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the printing office of a newspaper. A clumsy novice, looked on askance by his comrades of the chain gang, who sniffed the "aristo" in him and tripped him up instead of helping him. He was dismissed after three nights. Once or twice, with great difficulty, he managed to get translations of prospectuses and commercial letters to do. No result. His literary knowledge was baffled by ordinary business terms. One day Sainte-Luce met him wandering about, famished, and got him an engagement in a cinema, as a substitute, to collect the tickets. He had the misfortune to catch the 'flu, which after he had dragged about in cold and heat, forced him to stay in bed for a few days. Naturally when he returned his place was taken and he could not find another. Sainte-Luce, who had interested himself in his troubles for a whole evening, was not in the habit of sticking to one thought for long ; after giving Marc a helping hand, he forgot him ; and Marc did not know where to find him. God knows how he lived himself ! On the night they were together —after the cinema Sainte-Luce had dragged him to the back of a clandestine bar at a dance hall where he had a job, where, worn out and feverish, they had talked till morning—Marc had heard with amazement that the elegant Sainte-Luce was nearly as poor as himself. His intercourse with his mother, the pretty star, was strange and infrequent. He called her Josée, and spoke of her with incredible familiarity. She was always travelling : when they met at rare intervals, they made a great fuss with each other, and frequented night haunts together. She stuffed him with sweets, useless presents and dollars, if she happened to have any in hand ; he spent them on return presents, jewellery and flowers, which she did not know what to do with, but was never tired of, nor of lap-dogs, parakeets, or any other absurdity, which made them both merry. Then she disappeared again for months, leaving him in Paris without a penny, and neither of them worrying about the other. Or she would suddenly remember him and then he received a big cheque—or a trifle : this generally happened on a day when he did not know where to turn for a dinner. He laughed at it :

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in his heart this uncertainty amused him. Far from bearing her a grudge, he was grateful to her for being what she was. It gave him greater pleasure to know himself the son of that pretty girl than if he had been offered a serious and dependable mother in her place. He could always manage to get along somehow ! He was a born acrobat, and he had a thousand dodges for falling on his feet in case of accident. And he had such an obliging stomach ! Days of fasting did not frighten him at all ! A few crumbs in the hollow of a hand were sufficient for this bird—so long as it was a pretty hand. Pretty hands were never lacking, they came to him of their own accord. And one might wonder if occasionally between lodging and love-feast he did not accept an obolus from them. He made no mystery of it to Marc that night, when the latter expressed surprise at Luce's elegance since times were hard with him. Charming Master Brazen-Face replied :

“ The women undress me and dress me. They will do the same for you if you like.”

Marc choked, and found no words to answer him. Get angry ? It would have been out of proportion ; it was so evident that every shower would run off the duck's back ! He could not be judged by the same standard as Annette's son. In the days when there was still an after life in which human souls, after judgment were parked in three separate compartments, there would have been no place for Luce in any of the three ; he would have gone with the souls of the animals in the dovecots of eternity. Marc was not very sure of his superiority as a human soul. But it was better to affirm it if one wished—and he did wish !—to keep a foothold.

In any case, he could not forget that one night Luce, without hesitation, had offered him every penny in his purse : and he was the only one of the friends who had done so. Véron, the nabob, had been content with offering his cigar-case, one day when he met Marc, worn out with hunting for a job. He never took the trouble to ask how he was situated ; he didn't care a pin ; and Marc, while he hated him, was grateful to him for

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making no effort to conceal his selfishness. Nor had Marc taken any trouble to disguise his own feelings. Véron was in a villainous temper that day ; he had his arm in a sling. Marc asked him ironically if it was a war wound. Véron cursed, muttered something about a boil, abused some person unknown a bitch, and broke off the conversation. As they parted Marc gave him rendezvous at the next evening at Val-de-Ruche (Val-de-Grace). He might just as well have said the week with four Thursdays, for he had not the least wish to go to those meetings again. Véron broke into an insulting laugh, spat on the pavement with rage, called him Ruche's calf and heaped foul abuse upon the damsel. Then, as Marc surprised at this outburst, asked what fly had stung him, he broke off abruptly, cast a furious glance at him and turned his back.

Marc continued his hunt for work. He was still very unskilful in the battle of life */ pride is a bad teacher when it comes to wriggling like a snake through all the cracks of the enclosure that protects the larder.* But on the other hand it gives undaunted strength of resistance in the worst hours when the body is weakened and the spirit undermined by doubt. Though Marc might say to himself : " I shall be beaten ; I am," he would never say it to the world, and it is saying it that means giving up the struggle. The thought of suicide never touched him for an instant. Does one commit suicide on the battlefield ? There is no lack of death ? One need not even trouble to choose. Death takes care of that. No, what is lacking is life ! " For all this that surrounds me, these women, these men, this whirlpool, these wrestlings, these couplings, these are not life, they are but mildew on it. But true life, how can I reach it, where find it ? Does it even exist ? I don't know. Yet an irresistible urge turns me to the north like the magnetic needle. What is that north ? A field of ice ? The mouth of an abyss in the eternal snows ? I do not know. But the north is there. And I must go towards the north. The blind force sees for me, wills for me. My liberty is to will as it wills. Right or no right, that is my law."

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When all is said, all his wisdom in that moment was resumed in that of the old Gallic good sense :

“ Not to die, so long as one is alive ! ”

XIV

During the day he was engaged as outside salesman, keeping watch on the pavement at the door of a grocery in rue Caul-martin. With his collar turned up, he shivered through the grey weeks of January. At night he imposed several hours' work on himself, for reading, writing, meditating and trying to grasp as much as possible of the enigma of the world. But it slipped through his numbed fingers, and his head nodded with drowsiness. When he could, he made very strong black coffee to keep himself awake. Later on he kept awake too well. He lost the secret of plunging into the comforting lake of oblivion. He dragged his weariness, his pangs of hunger, his fixed ideas, and his burning eyes through a succession of hallucinated days and nights, which went round and round like the coils of a serpent, without beginning or end. He had not paid his rent. He was threatened with eviction. He had sold everything that he could sell. The few things which he valued, he carried about with him in his student's satchel—then (when he had to sell that too), in his pockets : he was afraid that they might be seized in his absence.

One day, half dazed with insomnia, he was standing like a heron, his neck sunk between his shoulders, at the corner of the shop-front, on the boulevard, shrouded in icy fog, looking without seeing—seeing after they had passed—the hurrying procession of phantoms in the street (he felt like a phantom himself, floating and melting away). Suddenly he had the belated impression of having seen in a pale face an anxious look watching him, a furtive hand closing on something which disappeared under a cape. He roused himself to attention and saw within a few steps the figure of a woman which had left its

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impress on his tired eyes. He saw her standing stock still before the display of goods ; he was sure that she had seen his eyes fixed upon her, and she was like a partridge with the dog at point : at that very moment the booty had disappeared under her dress—a few tomatoes. She waited to see what would happen. He did not know any more than she did. He went towards her. He was quite close, his arms also pressed against his body. They were almost touching each other, both were about the same height, Marc's mouth level with her thin cheeks ; her jaws were clenched, but she did not move. He had to make a decision. He made an effort, and said in a choked voice :

" Come, give it back ! "

But at that moment he saw a shopwalker at the shop door looking at them. He whispered quickly to the partridge :

" No, don't move ! They're watching us." What imprudence ! He bit his lip—So much the worse ! "*Alea jacta*". . . . He took a few steps to keep himself in countenance. She pretended to be looking at other goods. The shopwalker went back into the shop. Marc drew near. At a glance he took in the thin back, round head, and troubled face—a starving cat. With a sudden movement he thrust three or four bananas under her threadbare shawl, and said through his closed teeth :

" More nourishing ! . . . Take them, be off ! "

She gave him a quick look, more of surprise than gratitude : " Ah ! So you are one of the confraternity ? " There was no time for explanations ; she disappeared in the tide of the street. Marc said to himself : " I am the dog that reverts to wolf. I give empty stomachs entrance to my farm." A queer game ! He would have done the same thing again, without hesitation. It was a good stroke. But he did not feel at his ease in that game.

On his way home he met Bette and thought it a joke to tell her of the adventure. He was quite sure of the result. On the spot Bette forgot all her romantic ideas of anti-bourgeois

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revolt. The great grocer's blood rose to her forehead, and she exclaimed aith indignation :

" Ah ! no ! Ah ! no ! . . . That's too much ! It isn't done ! "

Marc laughed in her face. She left him with an air of offended majesty.

He did not keep on his job at the shop. He did not even have the trouble of refusing it. They got rid of him. Though there was no definite fault to find, he had made himself suspect. The dogs had sniffed a scent of the forest in his coat.

He entered further than before into the confraternity of hunger. No place anywhere. And in his pockets nothing left to sell. As the last straw one night what he feared happened : he found the door of his room locked ; he was evicted.

It was a night at the end of February ; gusts of wind swept the boulevards, and flurries of snow that melted as it touched the pavement. He bent his back inside his coat, trying to offer less surface to the blast ; he stiffened himself against it, with bowed head. He said to himself : " I shall fall down." He knocked against a passer-by. He did not look up. A hand took his arm. He shook himself.

" Rivière ! "

The hand did not leave go. He raised bewildered eyes . . . Ruche. He could not hear what she said in the noise of the boulevard and the howling wind. She drew him into a sheltered corner. He did not know what she asked, or what he answered. But it did not take many words to make her understand. And without further consultation she led him on. He did not argue. He let her drag him along, without exchanging a word, till they reached the door. Ah ! her house.

" Come up ! "

He went up.

" Come in ! "

He went in. The warmth of the room, fatigue, long fasting. . . . He turned giddy. Ruche pushed him into the only

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arm-chair. He felt that she was unbuttoning his dripping coat, and pulling his arms out of the sleeves. He heard that she was speaking, but he could only hear a murmur which blended with the sound of the kettle on the spirit-lamp. She came and went, he did not try to follow her movements. His eyes closed. He opened them for a moment : a hand against his lips was pouring a warm comforting mouthful down his throat, and a kind voice was saying : "Drink, my boy !" He had no strength to look higher than her hand, but the picture of it remained fixed in his mind. Long afterwards, when he thought of the good Samaritan, it was not her face, but her hand that he saw. In his semi-conscious state it seemed to him that it was the hand that spoke. When the draught of milk was finished, his head fell back against the chair, it hung sideways, hurting his neck, but he would not have moved ; he ached all over outside, but there was warmth inside. The kind hands raised his head, which was falling back again. . . . One more gleam of consciousness . . . then he went under.

When he came to the surface a few hours later, he was lying in the dark. A pale light from the street gleamed upon the ceiling of the room. He lay still, trying to understand, making no noise, uneasy as an animal just awakened in the forest. He felt slowly round him with his legs. He was on a mattress, undressed and wrapped in blankets. Below the mattress the floor of a room. Above, the sound of breathing, a rustle of sheets, and Ruche's voice :

"Are you awake ?"

Then everything came back to him, and he tried to raise himself, but his limbs were aching, and Ruche said :

"No, don't move !"

He replied :

"But where am I ? Where are you ?"

"Don't excite yourself ! You are under shelter."

He kept on moving about.

"No, I want to see . . ."

"Do you want me to light up ? Well, just for a minute."

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She switched on the electric light. He saw Ruche's head above him, her eyes blinking. She had made him a camp bed at the foot of her own bed. He sat up, and his forehead was on a level with the other bed ; he looked all round him, and saw Ruche lying down, the wall, the table, and the things on it . . . Ruche switched off the light.

"No, not yet ! "

"That's quite enough."

He lay down again, but his eyes had taken everything in ; and now one after another he realized the meaning of each thing. They were silent. Marc, feeling himself over, said :

"Oh ! "

"What ? "

"My clothes ! "

"I took them off."

"Oh, Ruche ! "

"They were wringing wet . . . the fortune of war ! "

"Oh, it's shameful ! I come and make you take me in, I'm in your way, I can't even help myself, I'm a girl."

"I say !" said a laughing voice above him, "you might at least not run them down. Girls sometimes have their good points."

"Yes, you. But one would have to go far to find another like you."

"You had only got to turn the corner of rue Val-de-Grace."

He felt on his face the long hand hanging down from above feeling for him ; it stroked his forehead, eyebrows, and eyes, and then, mischievously pinched his nose. He tried to catch it with his mouth, like a fish, without taking his arms from under the bedclothes. She said :

"I'm sure you don't know the saying of my native place."

"Which ? "

"*He who has not slept at Orleans knows nothing about women.*"

He moved.

"I am only too eager to learn ! "

The hand gave him a slap and drew back.

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"No, my friend, no, my friend. This is not the time for learning. Time to sleep. Put everything out!"

"Everything?"

"Everything that is burning, above, or below. Curfew, go to sleep!"

He was silent for a few moments, then he said :

"Ruche . . ."

"I'm asleep."

"Just a word. . . . What was that thing I saw shining there on your table?"

"Nothing."

"A revolver?"

"Yes."

She laughed.

"Not against you, you great silly!"

"I should think not! You can be as sure of me as of yourself."

She said to herself :

"Well, that wouldn't be saying much!"

But he heard nothing but her smothered laugh.

"You do trust me, Ruche, don't you?"

"Keep quiet! Lie down! Yes, my friend, as much as one can trust a man. . . ."

"Or a woman."

"Or a woman. . . . And, you know, you needn't complain. What I am granting you is a good deal. But as a general rule, with animals of your species, it is better to trust them with a weapon in one's hand."

" . . . *Para bellum!* What a pacifist! I bet that you have never used that toy! Do you even know how to use it?"

"Well, my dear, if you have betted, you have lost. What did you bet?"

"At your discretion. Whatever you like."

"Done! I make a note of it."

"When did you use it? And against whom?"

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" Guess ! "

" Do I know him ? "

" No one better ! "

" Who ? "

" I saw you together the other day at the corner of the Café Soufflot. . . ."

A sudden light : the arm in a sling. . . .

" Véron ! "

She smothered her laughter in her pillow.

" Véron ! Véron ? That fat hog ! "

" Yes, his principles taught him that strength is the argument preferred by females. With drums beating and torches lit, he set about giving me a demonstration of it. To show him that we were of the same opinion, I plugged him in the shoulder ! ' Which is the stronger, my good man ? ' You should have seen his amazement ! He stood gaping at me. And then what an outburst of oaths ! "

" He's still cursing," said Marc, with a burst of laughter.

They laughed like a couple of children.

" Now go to sleep !" said Ruche, wiping her eyes on the sheets.

He submitted obediently. They were both dozing. . . . Marc roused himself, sat up and said in an ardent, choking whisper :

" Ruche—Ruche ! "

" Oh ! bother you," said a sleepy voice . . . " I'm dead beat, done in. Leave me in peace ! "

Marc rubbed his head against Ruche's tucked-in legs.

" Ruche . . . Ruche. I admire you, I revere you. . . ."

" You're an idiot ! Shut up and go to sleep," said Ruche, quite touched.

They slept till morning.

When a ray of sunlight which had lost its way in the old street shot its arrow on to his closed eyes, and made the eyelids flutter, he heard her splashing about in her bath, behind the screen. She had been obliged to climb over him to get out of

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bed. She was still laughing at it as she squeezed the large dripping sponge over her long thighs.

"Ruche!"

"No time! I'm busy."

A bare arm waved to him over the screen.

"What are you laughing at?"

"At you."

"Laugh! You have a right to."

With an impulsive gesture she pressed the wet sponge to her lips to blow him a kiss.

"Ah! I am as big an idiot as you are."

"Why?"

"No business of yours?"

He had no wish to protest or to move. The good night, the good awakening, the feeling of well-being. He was still half asleep. But, no! It was disgraceful. He sprang up like a reed.

"I am going to get up."

"No, no, wait a bit. Bury your nose in the pillow! I'm coming out. You're forbidden to look."

Of course he did look; he saw the nymph from head to foot. From the other end of the room she flung everything she could lay hands on over him; cushions, towels, and his trousers which had got dry in the night; he was buried under the pile.

"Dive, and choke yourself!"

Before he got free she had clothed herself in a moment. She allowed him light and air again.

"And now dress yourself! I'm going foraging."

He was left alone and dressed himself.

She came back with milk, bread, and some slices of ham. They talked as they breakfasted *tête à tête*. Ruche's Chinese eyes, which had become distant again, rested on the young head which had rubbed itself against her legs in the night . . . the little idiot! They exchanged a smile of understanding. Without mentioning it, they had each come to the same conclusion. It was impossible to spend such another night.

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"Look here," said Ruche. "You are not afraid of any sort of job?"

"They're all stupid," said Marc, "but so are we, we have no right to be particular."

"That's what I like about you: you are too proud not to feel that you do honour to any necessity by accepting it. You don't purse up your mouth."

"I don't now."

"Yes, you have changed in the last six months. A wide mouth suits you better."

"Yours isn't small either!"

"*The mouth shows the mettle.* We are both made of sound wood, the sort they make arrows of."

"But what does the arrow aim at?"

"Yes, I was very much afraid last year, that the target of yours would never be higher than below the waist."

"You make me blush. . . . Have you got eyes everywhere? How did you know?"

"You looked as though you were caught in the glue."

"I have got away from it."

"That you were able to is no small thing. I have respected you ever since."

"Why couldn't you have told me so?"

"What good would it have been?"

"It might have helped on the days when one could not respect oneself."

"Six months ago it would not have meant anything to you."

"Well, it does to-day."

"Poor lad! He must indeed be on his beam ends!"

"Don't say that, just at the moment when I am beginning to make my pile!"

"And I am the first penny, no doubt? Here's to your future millions! Meanwhile, just till you have time to look round, would you be willing to take a job as waiter in a students' restaurant?"

Marc swallowed hard, and said bravely:

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" Yes, if you will sometimes come and have dinner there."

" Why ? "

" If I waited on you it would help me."

" You shall be helped."

She introduced him to the manageress whom she knew, and Marc set to work that very day, helped by Ruche's looks and advice. She did still more. When the rush of customers was over, she pushed Marc towards the corner of a table, and waited on him in her turn. After that all seemed easy. As to lodgings, she advanced him the rent of a room in a little hotel in the neighbourhood.

It would seem that after this they would have frequently seen each other. Not at all. At first Marc went and knocked at Ruche's door on two or three evenings : and two or three times she was out. Or was she really at home, squatting in a corner, a cigarette in her mouth, holding her feet in her hands ? The strange girl had a life of her own, to which she admitted no one ; and the rush of sympathy that had brought her close to Marc for one night did not give him any privilege of access. It would rather have the contrary effect ; Ruche's instinct would say :

" Aha ! He has lifted the latch ? Then I'll shoot the bolt ! "

.. .

THE SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

he had too much to do unravelling his own secrets to be curious about hers. His masculine prejudices also made him think that a girl's secrets were only "cat's piss"! He was quite fond of cats. But a cat is a cat. And a man is a man.

Without his knowledge, Ruche inquired how he was getting on until he was fairly afloat again. Then she lost interest. Just once she paid him a surprise visit in his room at the hotel ; it was not far off midnight. Marc expressed his surprise at seeing her out on the tiles at that hour. There certainly was a kind of feline gleam in her eyes. She was gay and familiar, yet strange, elusive like the eyes of night birds flying in a wood, near or far, with no sound of wings ; one cannot say where they will be a moment after. Towards one o'clock in the morning the owlet flew away without any attempt on his part to detain her. They did not meet again for months.

And it was at that time—early April—that there came back to him, with the flocks of migrants, the other bird : Annette, escaped from the marshes of the Danube.

PART THE SECOND
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XV

SHE had very nearly sunk in them !

She had let herself be carried off from Paris like some valuable object packed in cotton wool. It was a relief to have nothing to do for a time. . . . For a time. It did not last. Annette was not used to idle hands. The clearest impression she retained of the luxurious journey idling through northern Italy and Venice (sleepers, palaces, motor cars, etc.) was that she had passed through these beautiful countries, which she had known and loved from childhood in cold boredom. She was surprised at it at first : and then she understood : this luxury isolated her ; she had lost contact with the earth ; she only recovered it at rare moments when she could get away alone and walk in the narrow streets, or through the fields, on her own feet. Her toes sometimes quivered when she trod on the thick hotel carpets, the commonplace fleece persistently covering wood and stone. She longed to kiss the skin of mother earth with her bare feet. But her escort left her little peace. The bewildering chatter of the three little parakeets buzzed in her head day and night.

At first, when they reached Bucharest, there was a perfect hullabaloo, a deafening din, like some great birdcage at the Zoo, an innumerable family, relations, friends : all the "people" meeting again. They were at it for days and days, and nights and nights, exclaiming, embracing, and exploding. All doors were flung open. Everything was laid bare. Basket loads of flirtations, and worse, were poured forth to the naked eye, in every room and corridor. Few conversations between men and women that did not flutter round the flame in the lantern, burning red, and bump up against it. Annette, who thought it her duty to look after her charges, had her work cut out in that overheated atmosphere. She was not safe from pursuit herself : she perceived it with annoyance, but perhaps

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not without ironical satisfaction (oh, oh ! at forty-three!). Being a Parisian laid her open to attentions and attacks, despite her age. And Ferdinand Botilescu, who throughout the journey had pestered her with his ponderous gallantry, now began to make her feel rather uneasy.

However, so long as they remained in the town there was not much danger : the hunting ground was thick enough with game to keep the Nimrods busy ; and Ferdinand had other fish to fry—without mentioning politics, business, and the chase after honours and money.

But after two months they moved to one of the Botilescu estates : flat isolated lands in the midst of forests and marshes, alternately burnt by sun and frost. It was autumn. Heavy mists hung over the marshes, where the water-hens chattered. The heavy motor car sank in the ruts of the hollow roads, splashing and violently jolting the five women, and their lord and master. But Annette was the only one whose aching loins suffered ; and she admired the endurance of the Rumanian hindquarters ; they never seemed to notice it, they were of brass, like the throats of the three damsels who never ceased their chatter for an instant.

The huge dilapidated residence, half castle and half farmhouse, was built on rising ground like a molehill which scarcely overtopped the monotonous expanse. It had been built bit by bit, and not a single storey was on the level ; the winding corridors went up and down at every turn, by unsteady, worn, stone steps. It had been left uninhabited during the War, and nature had taken possession of it. Virginia creeper, red as blood in the autumn sunshine, and the ragged ivy which covered the façade, had climbed through the holes in the walls, and the worm-eaten window-frames, bringing an invasion of earwigs and ants. The rough and ready clean up, hastily carried out at the last moment for the coming of the owners, had not done much damage to the homes of black spiders in the shadow of curtains : lizards ran or slept on the walls of the corridors, and sometimes, on the ground floor, the hiss of a

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snake was heard. The girls and their mother took no notice of it ; though used to Western luxury, they were immediately at their ease, in the dirt and dust which lay thick on the sofas and divans. Annette was ashamed to admit her repugnance to herself, and tried to see the funny side of the adventure. The first night she made haste to put out her candle, the wick of which smouldered with a smell of tallow, without looking too closely into the corners. She stretched her aching limbs in the old bed of creaking hard wood, daubed with romantic scenes of love and war, in which two pairs of sleepers would have found ample room. In default of these it was inhabited by other, no less troublesome, guests. Awakened from her first sleep by the itchings under her skin, she was obliged to fly from her historic monument and the famished population which lodged therein, and to pass the rest of the night on a chair. It was passing from Scylla to Charybdis. Through the windows, which she had opened, there entered winged squadrons of mosquitoes. She could hear the frogs in the pond, and at early dawn, the cracked bells of monasteries.

The following nights, while waiting for a new bed which had been ordered from Bucharest, nobody was surprised that Annette should sleep on a mattress on the tiled floor. It was true that the girls had offered her a share of their bed. They slept soundly in the large room next to hers, with open mouths and soft regular snores, their knees drawn up under the untucked sheets, their bare thighs invulnerable to stings. They laughed next morning at Annette's swollen cheeks, forehead, nose and ankles. She laughed, too, scratching herself like a soul in torment : one had to pay the foreigner's tax ; when the vermin had levied it, one became mithridatized. It is an ill wind that blows nobody good ; it was perhaps as well that she should look ugly in the master's idle eyes. But she deceived herself if she supposed that he would be put off by such a trifle. He hung round her a great deal too much. Always eager to dance attendance on her, he showed her excessive attentions, which bored her extremely ; he affected to treat

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her as a guest in his house ; but when his heavy eyelids were raised a little she saw lightning gleams in his eyes (quickly extinguished) which were not very reassuring. There were certain moments when it would not have been pleasant to be alone with him. Consideration would not have weighed much. He would have treated her like a mare. That was his way with the girls on his estate when he came upon them milking the cows in the cow-house or wading in the marshes tying up bundles of cut reeds. They adjusted themselves afterwards, clucking with a furious and satisfied air, like hens. And the master's wife and daughters did not seem to be unaware of it ; they attached no importance to it ; perhaps at heart they were proud of their sultan. More than one of the little peasants were made in his image. The animal was always hungry. Heavy meals, a diet consisting almost entirely of meat (Annette was sickened by it), rich wines, and *tuica* (prune brandy), could not fill the void which fresh air and idleness made in his stomach. Madame Botilescu idled about and dozed all day, putting all domestic worries on to Annette. Ferdinand spent his time in long walks, motoring, or shooting. Sometimes he took them all with him, riding or motoring. But Annette had distrusted him ever since the day when she had gone for a walk with the girls, picking flowers in the jungle of the marshes, and found that they had gone off and left her alone, and only the voice of the old fox answered her calls. She went home in the opposite direction, and reproached herself for her unwholesome suspicion at the sight of the ingenuous faces of the girls, who fell upon her neck protesting that they had hunted for her everywhere. But the suspicion she had driven away persisted in returning, like a dog curled up on a mattress. She had caught certain sidelong glances between the little humbugs that made her sleep with one eye open. It suited her French curiosity to try to discover the motives which might influence their little simple complicated souls. Perhaps she realized better than they did the secret grudge they might have against her for interfering with their flirtations in Bucharest. The

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eldest especially, who was most prodigal of tender embraces, would have liked to get a tooth into her, one of the sharp, baby-fox canines that showed under her full, downy lip. Were they liars? No, if lying is to say the contrary of what one means. They meant what they said—and the contrary. They were sincere and tricky. They loved Annette and they were amusing themselves by trying to make her fall into papa's toils. The youngest saw nothing in it, to her it was no more than a good trick. Even the second, who knew a little more, only thought of the governess's look of vexation when she was well caught. But the eldest, Stefanica, knew what she was about, and she found double delight in revenging herself on Annette, whom she loved, by delivering her into the arms of her father, whose exploits, perhaps, aroused forbidden feelings in her. She kept her feelings to herself, and did not clearly acknowledge her game to herself, though she licked her lips in anticipation. Annette, who had caught one or two glimpses of this, could not bring herself to believe it. But she kept watch.

One night, as she was just going to bed, she found that the key of her room was not in the lock. She had seen it there a quarter of an hour before; and the girls were with her in her room. They had suffocated her with their hugs, as they bade her good night. She had no doubt about it. The wolf's coat bristled. But she said to herself: "I'm stupid. Annette, my girl, you are getting romantic. You are too nervous. The key has fallen out. Or even if they took it, the children only meant to play a trick upon me. There is no need to bother about it." She got into bed. But three minutes later she jumped out of it. She could hear the smothered laughter of the two elder girls, who slept in the next room. She walked into their room in her nightdress, with bare feet. As she came in the candle was hastily extinguished. She relit it. They pretended to be asleep. And when Annette shook them and spoke angrily, they made a show of waking up, and with innocent eyes, swore by all the gods that they did not know what

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she meant ; they knew nothing about it. Annette wasted no time in argument. She said coldly to Stefanica :

" Get out of bed ! I am going to stay here. Go and sleep in mine."

The girl was startled ; she cried :

" No, no, no, no !" terrified.

Annette looked her straight in the eyes, and did not insist : she got into the bed and lay down beside her. Darkness reigned once more. They did not speak. An hour later the loose tiles of the corridor sounded under a footstep ; the door of the next room was opened ; someone was going into the room Annette had left. Annette raised herself on her elbow and listened. Stefanica, pretending to be asleep, was listening also ; her hurried breathing betrayed her. On the other side of the wall the excited man—he was in a state of semi-intoxication nearly every night—was furious at the disappointment ; he flung the sheets about, trumpeting like an elephant. Annette, no less furious than he, seized Stefanica roughly by the shoulders, and in a low voice called upon her to confess, hurling in her face insulting words in Rumanian (they are the first we learn in every language, with those that are required to get food). The girl, at her wit's end, continued her obstinate denials—until the moment when, in the midst of the fray, the lost key fell from under the pillow on to the tiled floor. The tricked gallant had left the room, banging the door behind him with rage, and made off, trampling like a buffalo. The two younger girls (who had only just realized, with horror, the meaning of their treason), fell upon their knees, overwhelmed with shame and emotion, weeping, kissing Annette's hands, wetting them with their tears, imploring her forgiveness. They were sincere. Stefanica bemoaned herself loudly, making her robust chest resound, as she beat her fists against it ; she wanted to spend the rest of the night lying at Annette's feet. They fell asleep again, choking back their heavy sobs, like whipped children. It was impossible to remain angry with them. But to trust them was equally impossible.

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Annette wanted to leave the next day. But the girls implored her not to go, with cries and transports of impetuous love. And Ferdinand, crestfallen, making no allusion to the baffled incursion of the night, kept at a respectful distance, with all the outward signs of repentance. Annette consented to postpone her decision. Indeed, there were serious material reasons to prevent her carrying out her intention ; she had no money ; and when she claimed her due, all sorts of dilatory pretexts were found for not paying her. Winter came and blockaded the isolated house ; journeys were difficult at that season ; one could not get away at will.

Annette resolved to wait until spring. The past alarm seemed to have quieted everybody down. There followed a time of sleepy tranquillity. The snow lying thick upon the fields spread its snug down upon men's hearts. The frozen pond sparkled like diamonds in the moonlight. They were borne along in sleighs with tinkling bells, their temples reddened by the bleak wind, ears warm under their caps, bodies wrapped in furs, made happy by the flow of rejuvenated blood, and the tips of their breasts grew hot. The dirt of the huts, with their roofs of reed, and the fetidness of the marshes, were clothed in a stainless tunic of white cloth. Annette tried, not without success, to interest her little geese in the misery of the peasants, with the wolf skin under their rags. She was charmed by their beautiful old songs, their features like medals, their barbarous and brilliant costumes on feast days, their ancient customs, and their good sense. She tried to talk to them, and their distrust relaxed. It pleased her to see, under the hard mask of the Dacians chained to Trajan's column, the laughing gleam of the irony that judges and jeers, like that of the Colas Breugnons of her own Burgundy. Sometimes also was heard the roll of thunder. It was distant. A word, a gesture, a raised voice. The centuries of accumulated revolt against the master. . . . The master knew it, but as it had been going on for centuries (with sudden explosions) it seemed to him a law of nature which the strongest (that is himself) used, and ought to use,

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for his own advantage. " You hold the horse between your thighs. When he jibs, tear his mouth with the bit ! " . . . Annette had perceived the silent duel and (needless to tell those who know her) she put her stake on the horse. When would it shake its back free from the grip ! . . . She was not sorry that she had stayed on. It was good to contact elementary forces once more ; this ancient land swept by the winds of winter, where gusts raised in swirls of snow the battles of Marcus Aurelius, and those still to come, which slept in the hearts of the Getae.

But the rough climate, and the drives in the open air, had given her back a vigour and bloom, whose insolent joyousness she would have been wise to tone down ; for though she was unaware of it, it was a tempting bait thrown under the pike's nose. She was in all the brilliance of her late autumn ; in full health and physical enjoyment, her mind at rest, for the moment, with regard to Marc, who was then, as she knew, under Sylvie's downy wing. She took part, with high spirits, in popular festivities for which the Botilescu young ladies dressed themselves and her in heavy, sumptuous peasant costumes (for the brutal relations between lord and vassals did not exclude familiarity). But when the costumes were donned, the comparison was not in favour of the little mistresses, and the young men did not hesitate. Annette danced with the gallants, and the cocks of the village. She did not see the angry jealousy in the frowning faces of the little cats ; nor did she notice the gleaming of the master's eyes, until he snatched her away from her village partner and caught hold of her in his turn. Then she said she was tired, and when the dance was over, she retired. In the following days she recovered her prudence. The alarm seemed to have no result. And all was quiet once more.

It was a day at the end of March. The pulse of the earth, still numb, was waking up. A hidden fever burned under the thick snow, which began to wrinkle ; and the corners of the frozen pond were chipped. At night, the cries of bands of

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migratory birds were heard, passing through the silence of the skies. Lent was dead and buried ; and invitations for fête after fête passed between the châteaux. The three girls had gone, with their mother, to a supper and ball on a neighbouring estate. Their father had been away for some days, and was said to be in Bucharest. Annette had not gone with her pupils ; shivers in the shoulders, and a headache, the first symptoms of influenza, had kept her at home. The evening was drawing on, and it grew dark. Annette was lying down in her room, and she made no effort to light up. From a room below, on the ground floor, she could hear the tic-toc of an old rusty clock, which had gone lame—and from the plain wrapped in darkness, the creaking of the ungreased wheels of a cart. She was dozing. The sound of a turning lock roused her. She did not try to locate it. But she had an uneasy feeling like the throbbing of a swollen gum. At first she attributed it to the 'flu. Then a sharp pain in the gum indicated the tender spot. The danger was not from within, but from without. She remembered that she had come upon Stefanica telephoning in hurried words, the confused meaning of which suddenly came back to her, and she remembered the girl's uneasy and furtive manner. She realized that she was alone in the château with a lot of cowed menials, servile, ready for anything, deaf and dumb. And she started up as she remembered the sound of a turning lock that had wakened her. She got up and went to her door, and found that this time it was locked on the outside. At that moment she heard the sound of a motor car arriving at the house. All became clear. The master was coming into the house like a thief. She shot the inside bolt, which she had had fixed, because of her suspicions. She knew the man was coming.

And the man came. He pushed at the door, which resisted. Annette stood silent on the other side of it, raging like a rat caught in a trap, and calculating the resistance of the bolt ; she judged that it would not hold out for long. She tried to gain time. She replied coldly and briefly to the voice of the

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man parleying, while she sought, wildly, like the rat, for some way of escape from the room. There was none, except through the window. She opened it. The room was on the first floor, at a corner of the house which advanced to the edge of the mole-hill ; and the window, with a round balcony, overhung the slope. Annette leant over the cast-iron railing and calculated the distance. She reflected. She felt the knotty stem of the old leafless creeper which had climbed round and twisted the bars of the railing like the coils of a boa. She went in, dressed herself, put on her peasant felt boots and her thick gloves, then she took the gloves off to get a surer hold. She hastily snatched up the things she needed most, she even found time, at such a moment, to follow the feminine instinct of looking at herself in the glass, while she drew the warm astrakan cap over her ears ; and she saw her angry lips answering " yes " and " no " contemptuously to the impatient beast who was making the door shake on its hinges. At last she made up her mind, after a last look round ; at the window she turned back to fetch a portrait of Marc which she had pinned to the wall above her bed, near the pillow, and she thrust it into the bosom of her dress. Then she climbed over the railing of the balcony, and, holding on to the coils of the creeper, she began her descent, sliding roughly, or getting caught, risking tearing herself open, or leaving one of her eyes on the pointed lances of the branches that whipped against her face. At one moment she felt such a sharp pain in her forearm that she let go. Luckily she was two-thirds of the way down ; and the snow broke her fall. She rolled all down the slope, and found herself at the foot of the hill, in the deep shadow of the house, behind which the moon was setting, her dress in tatters, her hands and thighs grazed, but still in possession of all the parts of her body. When she had recovered her breath, she started off across the fields, hurrying to take advantage of the last rays of the moon, to find her way. But the moon soon disappeared ; it was pitch dark, and though on the one hand it safeguarded Annette's flight from pursuit, on the other hand it hampered her by

making her lose all sense of direction. She meant to walk to Bucharest, where the French Consul would repatriate her ; but she was not well acquainted with the map of the country, and the opaque darkness robbed her of her landmarks. She walked and walked, seeking the scent like a dog, her nose to the ground, from which there rose a phosphorescence that guided and deceived her ; she fell into holes in the snow, she splashed into marshes, she sunk in the mud, she fished herself out, frozen and feverish. She walked all night, deluded by the unceasing choir of frogs, never perceiving that she was going round and round a huge pond. At the first glimmer of dawn, she found herself on a road in the middle of the marshes ; and above the reeds, within a short distance, she saw the outline of the damned château, from which she was flying. She started again on her harassed course. She passed a little peasant cutting reeds, his face black with dry mud ; he stared at her, and instead of answering her questions, took to his heels, leaving his bundle of reeds behind. She supposed that she was being pursued, and that he had gone to give information. She looked for some cross-road by which she might escape, but there was none ; the interminable road went straight on without a single break which could hide her, like a dyke between two lines of marshes. She hastened her steps in vain. The sound of a motor car which she saw coming told her that her pursuer was upon her. He had seen her, too, in three minutes he would catch up with her. She never hesitated, but rushed straight into the marshes. The crust of ice gave way ; she sank in the cold sticky mud, and held on to some stumps of willows. She heard Ferdinand's hoarse voice calling from the road ; he was anxious and irritated ; he implored her to come back. From the muddy trunk from which she emerged she cried : "No !" and obstinately flung herself back into the brushwood and disappeared from his sight. Nothing could be seen from the road but the movement of the reeds and rushes, as she passed through them like a tracked wolf. Rage rose to the crimson face of the hunter at this mad obstinacy.

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He shouted that if she did not come back at once, he would shoot, at random, as at an animal. She cried : " Kill ! " She too was drunk with fury. She persisted. She sank up to her chest in the mud, and the flat, stinking weeds slid like black viscous leeches about her skin. A hawk was crying in the murky sky. She thought :

" He shan't get me ! I would rather feed the rats and beetles in the marshes ! "

But he was terrified as he stood there. He changed his tone. He entreated her. He swore upon his honour (a lot she cared for his honour !) that he would respect her, that he was at her service, that he would accept her conditions beforehand. She did not believe him, the scalded cat ! . . . She kept her obstinate mouth shut, as much not to answer him as to avoid swallowing the fetid broth in which she was wallowing. She would never have surrendered if the mud had not stuck to her body and paralysed her movements ; as she tried to free herself from the twining weeds, she was being strangled. He went into the jungle to save her, at the risk of sinking himself, floundering in the mud ; he managed to catch hold of her under the arms, and drew her from her sheath. He brought her back to shore. She was muddy and black from head to heel ; but she had not lost her courage. She defied him. He had no wish to take up the challenge. He admired her. He spoke to her with respect, and regret that he had forced her to such a flight. He begged for pardon, entreating her to return to the château. He expressed himself with a humility and oratorical but sincere emphasis, which brought back the smile to Annette's face, hardened with rancour and a mask of cracked mud. She said :

" Very well ! We will pass the sponge over it ! We both need it. . . . But as to going back, no ! There can be no question of it. I am going."

He assumed a look of consternation, but he only protested as a matter of form. He was so well prepared for this decision that he had packed everything that Annette had left behind

into her trunk, and had brought it with him in the car. He offered to take her to the nearest station for the international express ; he only begged her, with the piteous air of an old schoolboy, caught sinning, to be so kind as to save his face by writing a letter to his family, explaining that her precipitate departure was due to an urgent call to her son in Paris. She consented, and got into the car.

They halted at the least sordid hut in the nearest hamlet, so that Annette might wash and change her clothes. Water was heated in a cauldron, and Annette set about washing herself from head to foot, after the expulsion of the swarming youngsters and the owners of the hut, while Ferdinand, modest and fierce, mounted guard with his back turned to the door. As Annette stood naked, her teeth chattering and her skin red with friction, she burst into a wild fit of laughter as she thought of the duke mentioned by Saint Simon, walking up and down with drawn sword before the door of the church in which the lady of his heart was relieving herself. And as influenza and the deadly cold of the marshes were twisting her inside, she did not shrink, Burgundian as she was, from imitating the lady, in the little yard, under the *egis* of the valiant knight. *Honi soit qui mal y sente !* Even Cleopatra can have colic.

They got back into the car. The nearest station was a long way off ; and when they reached it, by roads slushy with the thaw, they heard that a serious railway accident would hold up the Orient Express for some days : the permanent way was cut off by floods where it came out of the Carpathians. Botilescu offered to leave Annette at an hotel in Bucharest until communication was re-established. But she refused emphatically ; she was in haste to be gone. Though it would have been prudent to nurse her cold indoors, the fever in her limbs, and the excitement of her flight and pursuit, made her burn with irritated impatience to get out of the country. She was haunted by a morbid dread that she would leave her bones there. She had not thought of fear when she was struggling in the marshes. But now fear had come over her ; the mud

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rose to her chin (the putrid smell pursued her night after night ; she could smell it under her nails) ; she shuddered lest the slime should fill her mouth, she had the feeling of being choked by it. She made Ferdinand take her to Constanza, and she went on board the first boat about to sail. It was an Italian vessel, making a rather long round on the way back to Brindisi. She took no notice of Botilescu's remonstrances. She shut herself up in her cabin, laid low by overwhelming fatigue ; and she was left alone with her fever, she saw nothing of the voyage. She had but one thought—to get home, dead or alive.

XVI

She was back in Paris. She arrived before the telegram announcing her return, which had got mislaid in the lodge of some concierge : Marc had moved his tent several times ; and Annette had not received his latest address before she left. *She had some trouble in finding it* ; when she asked Sylvie for it she found that she did not know it. Annette did not conceal her displeasure at her sister's indifference ; Sylvie, who knew more about it, replied that she was not a nursemaid. She had other things to think about ! After she had left her abruptly, Annette thought that she had changed a good deal : her face was puffy, there were pouches under her eyes, she looked heavy and apoplectic. She reproached herself that, in her impatience, she had not asked after her sister's health. Sylvie, likewise, did not feel herself above reproach.

It was Sainte-Luce who put Annette on the track. But like a good comrade, he did not tell her that Marc, at the moment, was serving at a night club. He knew his friend's pride, and undertook to let him know. Annette waited for her son all night, in her room at the hotel, without going to bed. At dawn Marc knocked at the door. He was as eager to see her as she was. But when they met there were no demonstrations of affection. From the first moment they felt a coldness between

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them. They were not the same as when they parted. Both had suffered shocks, and their reactions were different. Moreover, they were both enervated for want of sleep. Annette could not quite conceal her rather cross impatience at her long wait, and the suspicions aroused by Marc's late hours ; and Marc felt it, and was irritated by it, and that she should have dropped in unexpectedly on his defeat ; and he was not sure that Sainte-Luce had not betrayed his humiliation. He asked, more drily than affectionately, why she had not gone to bed. There was perhaps more gentleness in her tone than in her intention as she replied :

" And what about you, my boy ? "

It lay with him to answer that he had not been amusing himself ; but he was too proud to explain ; and she seemed to be calling him to account ; he did not admit that he owed an account to anyone whatever. He did not condescend to answer the question. Annette examined him : his faded complexion, his tired features ; the precocious lines, new to her, at the sides of the nose, engraved by weariness and disgust. Her heart contracted at the suspicion of a disorderly life and its stigma on the mind. He let her imagine what she liked. His examination of her was equally unsatisfactory. She looked too well, too well-fed, her complexion blooming, and in her eyes and movements a joy of life which shone forth without her knowledge. No one would have supposed that she had just escaped from the Rumanian marshes, and a bad attack of influenza. Her high colour was deceptive. She had still a trace of fever. But the fact about which there was definitely no deception was that, in spite of all misadventures, she found it not at all bad to be alive. No, indeed ! She enjoyed it as she grew older. The incoherence, the unexpected, even catastrophes, and the uncertainty of the morrow, gave zest to the meal. It was deucedly more appetizing than the insipid menus of her youth, the bourgeois life of France between 1890 and 1900. She had a good stomach. Better than Marc's, she could see that. What could she do about it ? She could not

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pretend to be dyspeptic and anaemic to please him. He was thin, eaten up with bitterness, exasperated against Society, whose imbecile sprees, and vices without vigour, he was obliged to see at close quarters ; when he came out of these sewers of debauchery, he could not even eat the bread he had earned without nausea : the bread smelt of the sweat of prostitutes. He would have liked to put a dynamite cartridge under the world. And this perpetual feeling of irritation was exacerbated by contact with his companions in servitude, certain working men with whom he had recently come in contact.

One of them had achieved a certain influence over him—if one can speak of influence over a young man so distrustful as Marc. Eugene Masson was equally distrustful. They had made friends one night in the train, and coming home from work, walking through Paris towards two or three o'clock in the morning. Masson was a compositor in a newspaper printing works, and he got Marc a job there, after he had been kicked out of his night club, where his biting contempt had at last become too obvious (he had come to blows with a customer). The newspaper was ultra-chauvinist, and imperialist in affairs ; it attacked all Marc's and Masson's ideas. But outside the printing works, the directors did not care whether their compositors had ideas or not. That they were thinking men was of no importance. Do your work ! They paid regularly for the work. That was all Marc and Masson could expect of them. Revolt was not ripe. Still less the practice of non-co-operation after the fashion of Ghandi. Who would have thought of mentioning it in Paris ? And who would have made appeal to the heroism of abnegation which refuses bread earned by work which goes against one's conscience ? Yet there is more heroism available in the people of Paris than the weakness of leaders can perceive, or the people themselves realize ! It turns to bitterness for want of use.

Masson's bitterness had the advantage over Marc's of being more cruelly justified. The young workman had been "gassed" in the War ; death was in his blood. He burned

with indignation against the abominable selfishness and apathy of all these Frenchmen who had gone through such trials and did nothing to prevent their recurrence. He was particularly aggressive against Marc's caste, the young intellectual bourgeois (the old also. But they were not worth mentioning. Death could be trusted to sweep away the old carcasses). . . . He spoke with passionate sarcasm of their hedonism of thought (for he was a reader), their indifference to the suffering of the world ; they were the false *élite*, who were betrayers, good-for-nothing parasites, vermin gnawing the remains of the spoils ! . . . Marc has good reason to know the truth of the accusation ; he had himself (not for long !) picked up the crumbs under the table ; in his humiliation, his resentment against Sylvie flared up again. However, he tried, with an instinctive solidarity, which his revolted conscience already disavowed, to defend the existence and merits of the intellectual class. But when, under the sharp spur of Masson's insults, he tried to rouse the best intellectuals he knew from their comfortable neutrality behind their rampart of books, when he tried to get them to act, he found, to his shame, that the harshest judgments against the intellectual gentry were not harsh enough. They nearly all had means—and many had leisure—to see further and more clearly than others. There was a populace ready to follow gratefully the first disinterested leader. But they feared nothing more than to be followed by a too determined army, who would push them on, and compromise them. They pretended to be looking the other way. . . . "I have seen nothing. . . ." Their default, for fear of responsibility, was degrading. It should be branded on the forehead with hot iron. Even among the young writers who, to give themselves the luxury of being "human", were willing not to ignore political action, not one of those whom Marc knew ever committed himself wholeheartedly to any party ; they reserved themselves two or three different saddles : radicalism, socialism, internationalism, nationalism, that is a fugue from time to time, under cover of the old classic France, in the houses of

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the royalism of literature, which directed the votes of the Academy and the Press. After a stage of equivocal glances exchanged with the passers-by on either side of the street, the matter was treated according to the professional rites of the trade ; they invariably found a shoe to fit them. Paris offered every degree of intellectual prostitution—from the closed ring of the newspaper mountebanks, drawing fat salaries to poison the general public, which swallows anything, with their filthy lies—to the great geese of the Academies, and literary salons, artfully distilling their virus of “ voluntary service ”, not gratuitous, and of general paralysis. Their tacit function was, in the main, to divert from action. And to achieve that end any means were acceptable. Even thought. Even action ! For the paradox was that the passion for sport led to inaction in the end. The alcoholism of physical action and of movement for movement’s sake, diverted torrential energies from their natural channel, and used them up in going round the stadium or, at the end of their frantic race, threw them into the dustbin. In this the people were not the least affected. And Marc had a fine chance to oppose Masson’s sarcasms against the abjectness of the intellectual bourgeois, with derision of the working class besotted by sports. Sports finished the destructive work of the newspapers. They created a class of intoxicated and useless people. The great clubs bought stables of professionals, like horses, whom they called amateurs, and made up football teams. Thousands of workers, in their full vigour, sold their muscles without shame, enjoying a life of luxury, palaces, and *wagon-lits*, as international footballers, until the moment when their muscles grew prematurely stiff and their market value fell to zero, when they were flung on to the rubbish heap, like the corpses of the gladiators in the Roman games. But the gladiators were at least dead. The lives lost in the new stadium went on. The plebeian spectators cared no more about them than did those of Rome. They must have other athletes, and again others ! And at these spectacles they dispensed all the

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passion, all the fury which, well directed, might with one heave of the shoulders, have overthrown all social oppression. They brought a murderous chauvinism to the international matches. Games degenerated into combats. Some were killed. And the "forwards" at Rugby became clearers of the trenches. It was for this that those who escaped from the front had passed under the Arc de Triomphe ! This was the sole result of their oath to take the control of the State in hand, and to reorganize Society ! Not even "*panem et circenses*" The bread had to be earned, and the *circenses* paid for. The exploitation of the proletariat and of human folly had made progress since the plebs of Menenius Agrippa. No, Masson was no prouder of his people than Marc of his bourgeois ! When he tried to lecture his comrades of the printing works, they called him a damned bore, and did not take the trouble to argue with him. The only one who answered him, an old comrade of the trenches, shrugged his shoulders :

" What can you expect ? That we should go and get our skins riddled a second time for the Right of others ? Have another go at it ? I've had enough ! I am not such a mug as to bother about others. I look out for myself. Every man for himself ! "

And Marc and Masson, who bitterly denounced the selfishness of their respective classes, had not themselves the firmness of mind to renounce their congenital individualism, which was but another form of selfishness which brought their revolt to nothing. It is a great effort for a Frenchman who has freed himself from the prejudices of the masses, to conform to definite plans and to accept the discipline of a party. The weakness of French pre-War socialism was due to the looseness of its bonds, which brought its members together conditionally but could not hold them at decisive moments. And if the lesson Masson had learned from the War was the determination never to give himself, at any time or in any place, to any master, or the command of any party, and to belong to himself, himself to himself

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Marc and Masson were sick of words. But they spoke—for lack of acting. They spoke, spoke of the deeds that they did not, that they could not, do. And they went away depleted, sick of themselves and each other. Action! Action! Oh, womb of action to be fertilized! ✓

Society does not realize sufficiently that this unsatisfied puberty of the will is as dangerous as that of sex. A healthy nation has always need of some goal for its efforts. If a noble one is not offered, it will take an ignoble. Crime is better than the sickening emptiness of a life withering in sterility! More than one of our young acquaintances of 1914 threw themselves into the War to escape degrading boredom. If these have, since, disgorged their orgy of blood, others have grown up after the War, who, in their turn, are preyed upon by the maddening lust for action. If the female is lacking, they break their heads against the bars of their cage like wild beasts in a menagerie, that long torment has not yet degraded. Marc and Masson went growling round and round their den. And there were hundreds like them, each one isolated in his own den, each one howling his agony and fury in the depths of his heart. ✓

But here Annette's son was sustained by his good blood. That blood was perhaps not that of his race. It would not do to go too far back up the Rivière stream. Good and evil were mingled in it. But each one remakes his own blood in the course of a life. Annette's proud effort was inscribed in her son's globules. ✓ Though Marc might be a rather dirty little boy, as nearly all little males of twenty are, when taken in the state of nature, muddy and unfiltered. With a mind (body and soul) profoundly troubled, and in a time and in conditions of life morally appalling—no faith either in man or outside man, not a prop!—he never faltered in his instinctive, his absurd, his heroic will to overcome himself. . . . “Overcome what? Oneself? Who is oneself? Me? That less than nothing? That me which evades me, that I do not know, am I even sure that he exists? Sure or not, I will, I will, I will! I overcome him. I will not let myself go down with him. . . .” In such

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moments he spoke of himself as of another. But he had charge of that other. Even when that other slipped through his fingers, flinched, fell, prostituted himself, he maintained intact against him, for him, to judge, condemn, and raise him up, fine sentiments which his corrosive irony yet jeered at as fossils, honour, moral pride, firm determination not to derogate. . . . "Derogate from what? . . . Idiot! Idiot. . . ." From the cowardly bourgeois who planted me and ran away? Or from the womb which delivereded itself up, and delivered me up to this abominable life, which I never asked to come into? . . . Idiot! . . . So be it! . . . Willing or unwilling, I have entered into it! *She* has thrown me into the battle. I will not surrender!"

And he thought:

"*She* (that womb) has not surrendered. And shall I? Would I be less than a woman?"

The young male deemed himself infinitely superior. . . . But in his inmost heart, well hidden, unformulated, there was an "*Ave mater . . . Fructus ventris. . . .*" The fruit will not betray the tree.

But at that moment the tree was the betrayer. . . .

With severe looks Marc observed this woman, this mother, who had returned to him from the East, and who was developing strangely in the fermenting life of Paris. She was suspect to him. She did not react with such bitterness as he would have liked against this world which had become his personal enemy. Did she accept it? He could not read the bottom of her heart. But on her lips, in her eyes, and all her person, there was a sort of active idleness, happy, and free from revolt or remorse. Remorse for what? Did he wish her to feel any for this world, for the miseries and shame of these men, and for participating in them? That was all very well for him, who was still a beginner at the bitter game in which we suck all the gall of life as if it were distilled for ourselves alone! She had had time to become familiar with the taste or the

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distaste. "Gall is mixed with all food. That does not prevent me from eating ! One must eat. I take life. I have no choice. . . ."

He took life also. But with vexation, with rancour, with smothered rage. And he could not endure that the other person, his mother, should accommodate herself to it so naturally, and that she should even appear to take an indecent pleasure in it. But what right had he to forbid it to her ? The right which he had tacitly arrogated to himself, the right of more than son, the right of a man. This woman was his property. But if he had told her so she would have laughed in his face. He knew it, knew too that she would be quite right. And the knowledge only made him rage all the more.

XVII

So Annette found herself on the rocks once more, after chequered experiences. She had very nearly left some of her wool in the last, and anyone else would have lost a good deal of her confidence in herself and life. But Annette's wool grew thick. And as to confidence, there was no risk of her losing it ; for she did not even bother herself to have any. "Have confidence in whom ? In what ? In myself ? In life ? What nonsense ! What do I know about it ? And what do I need to know about it ? To build upon the future is to begin building from the summit. . . . All very well for men ! . . . The earth is not likely to fail me. I shall always know where to set my feet. My good large feet ! They still find the same pleasure in walking. . . ."

Her robust constitution showed no trace of the pneumonia following on influenza, luckily conjured away in Italy, on the way home. And in spite of her forty-five years there was not a sign of the change of season. Sylvie, though younger, was already feeling the discomfort thereof, with no resignation (and those around her still more ; for her temper was not

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improved; she was restless and irritable), she drew sharp comparisons and seemed to be reproaching her sister. Annette laughed and said :

" That's what comes of beginning too early ! Virtue is always rewarded."

" Fine virtue ! See what you are doing with it now ! "

" And what do you know about it ? "

No, she made nothing of her virtue. Nor of vice either. Indeed, in these years she found that she was strangely indifferent to both the one and the other. When she thought of it, she came near being ashamed : she tried : but even in that—being ashamed—she could not, in sincerity, succeed.

" But what has come over me ? . . . What ? Not even the strength to be immoral ! . . . The worst of all—amoral. . . . What a come down ! Blush ! Blush ! . . . Ah, no ! I am quite red enough as it is. . . . All the same not so bad as poor Sylvie with her gusts of *sirocco* that make her forehead, cheeks, and neck, like a field of poppies. . . . What insolent good health ! . . . "

She certainly inspired no pity. Yet her circumstances were by no means brilliant. She lived from month to month, with just enough in reserve to live for a few weeks with the strictest economy ; she had only one meal a day, in cheap restaurants, where the food was neither choice nor abundant. But, God knows how ! everything benefited her.

She saw very well that her healthy appearance was an object of severe scrutiny, whenever her son met her. He would have liked to call her to account for her scandalous indifference. He called it indifference because she did not fly into a passion as he did, against someone or something : her rather short-sighted, prominent eyes were busy looking at everything, reflecting everything, without taking sides. But nothing that she saw was lost, she kept the image in their depths. One of these days she would make up the account. . . . Not to-day ! She went her way, catching every reflection in passing. And she continued to enjoy the strange euphoria, which had

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persisted . . . for how long ? . . . though she did no more to keep it than she had done to acquire it. It was not so strange that she should have enjoyed it for some months, or some years, in the relief which had followed the nervous effort of the War years : the whole epoch had shared it, more or less ; it had been the natural revenge of life against death. But as regards the epoch, that revenge had exhausted itself in two or three years : it had flared up like a fire of straw, and the barn had burned with it ; there scarcely remained the four tottering walls, open to the wind and rain. Annette's barn showed no trace of the fire ; it was of good stone, well built, and her harvests were stored in it ; there was room in it for last year's and for next year's. It was this that was so surprising : that her euphoria should be prolonged when that of others had sunk down in weariness or disgust, as if it had been due to opium smoking. Was it not of the same quality then ?

Not by a long way ! It was based on energy and maintained by activity. No narcotics ! To act. . . . (But is not that another kind of narcotic ?) Whether that activity were successful or not was of secondary importance. With success or without, it was all gain. For at every step—even a false step—she picked up with her antennæ more particles, and more and more of this universe in the spasms of death and renewal—this rich meadow nourished by the decomposition of a world.

But why did not millions of antennæ younger and livelier than hers get the same enjoyment from it ? Why, on the contrary, did it produce in the young men a sort of vertigo of horror, or fury, or of hallucinated fear ? They saw nothing but the corpse under the meadow. Did she not see it too ? She did see it. She saw both what was above and below. What then ? It was in the order of things ! Much death, much life. And one is the daughter of the other. . . . Then, did she no longer condemn the War ? She was quite ready to recommence her fight against it, and against the wretches who had made it their awful game of fanaticism, vanity and profit. . . . How did she reconcile all these things ? . . . Do not

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ask her to explain ! Her nature knew it, that nature of woman, deep, blind, and sure, which partakes of the great laws of all nature. But her mind did not know it—unless a few gleams had recently passed through it ; but those gleams had been too brief to enable her, as yet, clearly to distinguish their meaning. . . .¹ Yes, she fought passionately, like nature, against all that kills. But she burned passionately like nature, for all that lives, with all that lives, with all those flames of new life which spring from the field of the dead. And the harmony of life and death, whose laws her reason was not capable of formulating, was quite simply realized by her eyes, her hands, her movements, and the natural course of her life.

She loved to see and to live. And in the life of that new meadow which grows from the blood of the dead—("And I also, am I not dead ? And I rise again ") everything interested her, even the worst. The Burgundian showed no disgust. She was not squeamish. Straight and strong, she was well balanced ; that is taken for granted. When one is healthy and of good stock, there is no need to mention it. But it does not give one the right to say to others : "Be what I like!"—"Eh ! my friend, be what you can ! I can very well put up with it. . . . I don't say that I won't make fun of you. . . . It is one of the pleasures of existence. . . . But don't let it worry you, any more than you worry me ! Go along, show yourself as you are, naked or clothed ! Be handsome or be ugly, you interest me. All food is not of the same quality. But I content myself with everything that nourishes me. I am hungry. . . ."

That was just what made Marc furious. . . . That insolent appetite, indifferent (one would say) to quality. . . . And that animal joy, tranquil, robust, ready to swallow everything,

¹The reader will find in the next volume, the remembrance in Annette's mind of her passage through Italy, and of her encounters there on her way home from Rumania. It is not yet time to relate them, their traces seemed effaced in her. The images sleep. . . They will awake.

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being and beings ! Yet he could not defend himself any more than most of those who came into contact with Annette. Even when they were intelligent enough to seize the gleam of lucid irony in the clear eyes that probed them, they could not be hurt by it. For under it all, these grown-up children could not have expressed it, but they felt it—there was for all of them, even the worst, an unconscious maternity.

XVIII

She chose her children well !

She did not choose them. She took those Fate put into her arms. . . . It is a figure of speech ! Though her arms might be ever so plump and muscular : I cannot imagine them carrying that species of ogre of Auvergne, or bull of Ashur, Timon, the pirate of the Press ! It was he who held her. She had gone and thrown herself into his galley.

One day, when she was out of work, she met an old school friend whom she had not seen for twenty-five years. This woman of the comfortable, steady bourgeois class, before the War, had been reduced like so many others of her class to a scanty pittance, which grew smaller month by month as the last trickles of the small remaining capital leaked through the holes of the coffer. Before the War she had given Annette the cold shoulder after the double scandal which her irregular life and her ruin had caused in the bourgeois circle of respectable people. But after the War, which had left her a widow, ruined, with a mother and three children, she had been obliged to come down from her comfortable respectability and seek a bare livelihood anyhow or anywhere. Her fine principles, her certificates, her honourable family, were little help to her. She no longer made conditions with life. She was obliged to accept those that life laid on her. And she had to think herself lucky when life did lay any on her. For life takes no heed of these drifting spars ! But though the poor woman yielded to necessity, she

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could not reconcile herself to it. She still kept to her "high collar", dirty, broken, threadbare;—it has become as it were incorporated in the species: they live and die in it. And it is a heavy burden for the unfortunate survivors of the species who have to go hunting for their daily bread in the post-War jungle.

The day she met Annette, she had left her place. Her first movement was that of a hunted beast that throws itself into the first refuge. She certainly did not remember at that moment that she had once condemned Annette! Once she was sitting on shore and Annette was in the water. She was in the water herself now, and she was drifting. She met this swimmer, who had managed to keep herself afloat for twenty years. She clutched her desperately. At least, that was her first gesture. . . . But what could Annette do for her? She felt it at once. Annette was seeking like herself.

Annette saw her discomfiture and got her to talk. The two women said nothing about the past. It was dismissed in three phrases. The present was all absorbing. The human spar was trembling from a recent shock, and it was covered with the foam of it. She could think of nothing else. . . . She related in a broken voice, choking with anger and tears, the last trial she had endured. She had found a place as typist in the offices of a great newspaper with a large circulation, and a lusty voice that deafened Paris with its roaring. Anyone else would have realized that all would not be peace inside its jaws. But the poor innocent had had no inkling of it. She was still of the epoch when the bourgeoisie had a respect for the printed page, when the fabulous myth still persisted (though already very down-at-heel) of a liberal Press, the exercise of which was a priesthood. She fell from the heights into the cave of the Forty Thieves, where Afrits jostled with lance and tongue. And the whole band was led by a king of the Afrits, more horrific than all the others put together, a Minotaur at whose roar a million readers trembled—Timon (he ought to have been called "Ubu") ever ready to sprinkle his visitors with his chamber-slops. The editorial staff, which stood between the

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master and the outsider, received their share of the shower : they were used to this baptism, and from the top of the ladder to the bottom each one shook himself on to the one below him. The wretched woman who sat on the last rung of the ladder received the lot. Not a drop was wasted. Horrified at the first shower, she endeavoured to show fight. But her revolt did not go far. They measured the victim at the first glance. She looked like a frightened hen ruffling her feathers, and rushing under the wheels of the car in her efforts to escape it. It became a game. The cars began to hum. They came from every side. They tossed the ball of feathers from one to the other. It may be imagined whether the poor bewildered soul could keep her head and fingers on her work in such a state. In the hubbub she could not follow the disjointed phrases dictated to her ; she got behindhand, lost ; she could not grasp the meaning of the words, she even forgot her spelling—the supreme *pudendum* of the bourgeois mind ! The result may be imagined. They had no consideration whatever for age or feelings. She would go home ill, from the insults she endured all day, and cry over them in bed. The enormity of the conversation which went on over her head all day, continued to deafen her at night. She panted at it, driven mad, as if ripped open by such outrages. The last blow had fallen that day, an infamous piece of buffoonery to which the Ubu-King had treated his staff, at the expense of an inopportune visitor, an old ill-advised *cure* who had come to beg of him. . . . The scene was too much in the style of Karagheuz to be depicted here. . . . The *cure* had seen the Devil, he fled. The hen likewise, as soon as she could. She was determined not to go back.

Annette listened, her hand tucked under the ruffled wing, patting it silently, as she tried to calm her. When the other had finished her tale, she said :

“ Then the place is vacant now ? ”

The other choked back her sobs :

“ You would not take it ? ”

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"Why not? So long as I am not taking the bread out of your mouth?"

"I will eat no more of that bread."

"I have eaten all sorts! We know that it is best not to look too closely at the baker's hands."

"I've seen them. I can't eat any more of it."

"I'll see them. And I'll eat."

The distracted woman, in spite of the horror that clouded her forehead, could not help laughing as she looked at Annette, good-humouredly defying her with her chin:

"You have a good appetite!"

"I can't help it," said Annette, "I am not pure spirit. I must eat first. Afterwards the spirit will lose nothing by it. I'll answer for that! I do not sell it."

She provided herself with the necessary information: the salary was good, the work was not beyond her; by the greatest chance she had the good luck to know from older days one of the rowers in the galley, an old sub-editor (she used to dance with him in the days when she was flirting in drawing-rooms, with Roger, her husband that might have been). She did not wait till the end of the afternoon to secure the place while it was still warm. She said to herself:

"I should like to see myself hesitate! The world is a cage of monkeys. We are born into it and we can't get out. One lot or another, there is nothing new about their grimaces to frighten me. And as to the great orang-outang . . . We shall soon see! I am curious to come face to face with him!"

Yes, curiosity. . . . If Annette had been Eve she would not have hesitated to pick the apple. She would not have been such a sneak as to make Adam pick it. . . . "I know I risk. And I risk to know more. The old morality advised us to avoid risks. But the new has taught us that he who risks nothing has nothing—is nothing. If I am not, I will be."

Was it a vice to be curious?—Perhaps, but with Annette it was a brave vice. For her curiosity was accompanied by a challenge thrown at the unknown of which she went in quest.

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Her soul was rather like that of the knight errant. For lack of giants, she faced monkeys. And then her excuse to herself (the lean Don Quixote had not got it) was that which her fine teeth gave her—to eat. "Feed me, monkeys!"

She put assurance into the carriage of her head, and into her walk, as she made her first entry. She knew very well that her position in the newspaper offices would be not what they made it, but what she made it for herself, from the first moment. She was cool, clear, and smiling, as she answered questions. Not a word too many; but in twenty words a clear statement of her references and capabilities—those useful for her purpose; the others are best kept to oneself; the ignorant do not thank you for them. Then, taking no notice of the glances and remarks that summed her up, nor of the mocking tone by which they tried to confuse her, she set to work, and acquitted herself with skill.

They were not fools! The man of Paris has a good eye. He is quick to feel the breasts and the heart of a woman under them. In Annette's case both were firm. "Present arms! . . ." In silent agreement they accepted her. They gave themselves the further luxury of giving out a basketful of enormities, at the top of their voices, so as to test her ears; but the good Burgundian ears which never missed a word, were neither more nor less red at the tips: "Go it! my monkeys! . . . You are not very inventive! . . . You have nothing more to show? Then let's have peace!"

Annette laughed inwardly without blenching, making her fingers dance over her machine, but without exaggerated zeal. She did not feel called upon to assume a tense air to show her application to her work. The old sub-editor, who watched her sideways like a pike, and afterwards read over her copy, did not think long comment necessary; he said: "You'll do"—They all thought so. It was settled.

There remained the master. He was away for a few days on one of his mysterious expeditions in which he handled nations in business—and women, too, sometimes: for when one of

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them held him, he never rested till he had got her ; he went off on the chase ; nothing could be done till he was satisfied ! He was away this time for a fortnight. Annette had time to make herself safe in the saddle. She even had time to forget the master's existence. When he came back she never noticed it till he had left the room. He had walked through with a heavy step, scowling forehead and a wicked eye. The employees rose as he passed. Annette went on reading and tapping, looking neither to right nor left of her paper. While following every word exactly she followed inwardly memories of the past that amused her. And she was smiling. She did not escape the master's eye. His heavy look rested on her from head to foot. She did not flinch, but that was no merit, since she did not see him. It was only as he went out that she had a belated perception of the silence ; and she raised her eyes, asking :

“ Why, what is happening ? ”

Her neighbours laughed :

“ He has just passed.”

“ He, who ? ”

She was a thousand miles away. . . . She started when she heard. They whispered to her that he had taken her measure from head to foot.

The old sub-editor told them to be quiet. The master had left the door of his room open. And he did not seem to be in an easy temper to-day. He must have left some of his feathers in an adventure. Ware the squall ! . . . Silence reigned once more. Nothing could be heard but very diligent rattling of the keys under the fingers of the typists and the noise of the traffic in the street. Then came a burst of furious ringing, and the thumping of fists on the master's table. For the first time Annette heard the howling of the orang. The old sub-editor rushed forward. There was a *fracas* when he went in. The storm burst on his back. And in the room their noses down, the others were none too comfortable. Naturally, at the first glance, the master had pounced upon all the blunders

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which had accumulated in his absence. They saw the old sub-editor come out of the room quicker than he went in, like plum-stone pressed between the fingers. And behind him, in the doorway which he filled, the huge stature of Timon standing at the top of the three steps. His hands were full of sheets of paper ; and he roared :

“ Pack of idiots ! Here, take your bum fodder ! ”

And he sent them flying into the room. They sank their heads into their shoulders. Only Annette looked at him. Timon cast a withering glance at her. She still looked at him while tapping her copy, a brief glance to verify, then face to the storm again. He was on the point of shouting :

“ Put your blinds down ! ”

She did not lower her eyes. He heard her regular tapping. He came down two or three steps in a fury. Then he thought better of it, turned his back and retired into his den.

After a while more ringing came. A terrified employee went for orders and returned with a roll of scribble ; an article by the master to be copied fair. Annette was given Timon's smutty prose to type. She took a glance at it and gasped, and leaning towards the sub-editor, she said :

“ I say, chief, one is supposed to clean this up, isn't one ? ”

He jumped.

“ What ! Clean up what ? ”

“ Well, the filth. There's some in this ! ”

He threw up his arms and said in a smothered voice :

“ Wretched woman ! Don't you dare ! ”

And he added with a bitter jeer :

“ That's just it's chief merit ! ”

Then seriously :

“ Now, you know, no nonsense ! You would get us all into a fine mess ! Tap the whole thing exactly.”

“ With the bad spelling ? ”

“ What does it matter to you ? . . . Well, correct the worst mistakes, but be very careful, so that he is not obliged to notice it ! The b—— would never forgive you. . . .”

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" But all the same, here he goes messing about with a lot of words he doesn't know the meaning of ! He makes Piraeus a man. . . . "

" Oh, what do I care ! It's his own look-out. Mine is to have peace in here. You, especially, shut up ! Don't meddle with what doesn't concern you ! All right, fair lady, no malice ! . . . But let it be understood ! Tap literally ! "

Annette was hard-headed. She understood when it pleased her. She tapped with her finger-tips, disgusted. The stuff stuck to her flesh, it was greasy. She wanted to wipe her hands. And it smelt. She wrinkled her nose. . . . All the same, it had a male smell ! It was powerful. And every now and then there was a bone-breaking blow of the paw. . . . A formidable beast. . . . What a pity one did not dare—not purify it—it was take it or leave it—but save him from the traps he gratuitously threw himself into—dreadful mistakes, of language, history, science, etc. Why the deuce did he go and muddle himself up in all that ? " And why shouldn't I dare ? . . . I shall be playing him false by not daring. . . . I'm not going to spend my time here shivering in my skin like these cowards. . . . I will dare. . . . And I dare. . . . "

She dared. She corrected boldly—not the filthy language (that is the colour of his escutcheon, I must leave him that) but his blunders. It is permissible for an ape to be an ape ; but not an ass.

" I'll cut the ears off. Keep the rest ! "

The sub-editor noticed nothing. He had not the patience to verify. But nothing escaped Timon. It did not take long. The copy had hardly been given to him when the furious ringing resounded once more. The sub-editor trotted into the cyclops' den, his back ingratiatingly rounded. He came out again immediately, white with fear and fury, and his little crooked terrier legs ran towards Annette as he shouted :

" Dirty beast ! . . . Yet I warned you ! Very well, my girl, go in, go in ! . . . He wants to see you. Ah ! pig of a woman ! You'll get it in the neck ! "

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He was choking with rage. . . . Annette got up, smoothed down her dress and went towards the den, forcing herself to look very calm—yet her heart was thumping loudly in its prison ! Nobody could see it. That was the essential thing. She did not take one stair quicker than another. She hesitated for a second at the top and walked in.

Timon, seated behind his table, bending forward, both his great fists resting on the papers, watched her approach, making eyes like the *Condottiere* of Antonello, or the Duce. She came forward. Within three steps of the table she stopped and stood straight and still. He sneered.

" So it's you ? Who commissioned you to wash my sheets ? "

" They're not washed, I promise you ! I only darned the tears."

The terrible fists banged the table with such violence that a spurt of ink from the ink-pot splashed on to Annette's dress. And leaning on his fists, Timon raised himself as if he were going to fling himself upon her.

" And you laugh at me ? "

Annette said coldly :

" Excuse me ! Will you please pass me the blotting roller ? "

He passed it mechanically ; their faces were so close together that she could feel his furious breath on her cheek. She did not look at him. She was busy blotting up the ink with the roller. She said icily :

" Come . . . have a little more self-control ! "

He gasped. He swayed a few seconds longer on his fists and then sat down heavily. Annette finished cleaning up the ink. He watched her at it. She put the roller back on the table.

" There were holes in your sheets," she said. " I thought I was doing right in patching them. Perhaps I was wrong. ~~It is a woman's mania ; she cannot see torn linen without wanting to mend it.~~ If I did wrong I am sorry and I tender my resignation. But is it really any use for you to display your torn and dirty linen to all your servants ? " She pointed over her shoulder to the office.

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As she finished she looked him straight in the face. He opened his mouth, ready to explode ; then the scowling forehead relaxed, the violent mouth showed a grin, and he said almost gaily :

“ Come, sit yourself down there, washerwoman ! ”

“ I didn’t wash anything, I’ve told you so. I give you back the bundle just as . . . clean as I received it.”

She sat down.

“ Yes, you mean that you have dirtied your hands with it.”

“ Oh ! as you may well suppose my hands have had to deal with plenty other dirty linen. I am not squeamish.”

“ Then, do me the honour to explain why you took upon yourself to change this and that ! ”

“ Have I the right to tell you the truth ? ”

“ It seems to me that you take it without leave ! ”

“ Well, when I see you taking the risk of spoiling the effect of a racy article by schoolboy howlers, is it not doing you a service to correct them discreetly ? ”

Timon blushed to the neck. He said, vexedly :

“ Schoolmarm, eh ? Where did you teach ? ”

“ The last time in the marshes of Rumania.”

“ What are you telling me ? I know them. I’ve dragged my boots through them.”

“ I left one of mine in them ; and ever since, for all my scrubbing, there must be some mud left under a toe-nail.”

“ You’ve been a rolling stone, it seems ? ”

“ Like you, like everyone else, for the last ten years. But I have gathered no moss, as you have.”

“ At least, you haven’t lost any of your own. You’ve got grit.”

“ I must have, since I am alive ! In our times, life makes short work of those who are soft in mind or hide.”

“ There are still too many on the road ! ”

“ That cannot trouble you much.”

“ You mean, that I trample on them ? Ah ! they’re worse

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than the mud of the Danube. One sinks into it up to the stomach. Didn't you see it in what I write ? "

" Yes, I saw the mark of your fingers very well."

" When you dig up men with a shovel you haven't time to use scent."

" When it comes to digging, you are a first-rate navvy."

" That's the first compliment you've paid me."

" I am not paid to pay you compliments but to serve you."

" And it is to serve me that you patch me up ? "

" Naturally. It would certainly be easier to let you show yourself in Paris with holes in your clothes. But since I serve you, I serve you to the best of my ability, well or ill, but according to my conscience. And I don't want . . . "

" Me to show Paris my backside ? But, my child, I do nothing else ! I glory in it. If eloquence were not wasted breath with one of your sort, I would play you Danton roaring : ' I show them the head of Medusa ! ' But with you, no useless showing off. Settle yourself there, at that table and explain my schoolboy howlers, Schoolmarm ! "

She explained them to him in friendly fashion, without embarrassment : and he listened like a good boy. Then he said :

" Thank you. I will keep you. You shall stay here and look after my clothes. And meanwhile, this is to repair the damage I've done to yours. Replace that dress that my great paws have splashed ! "

But Annette said :

" Nothing from hand to hand. And as to the dress, it is good enough for work. It is more prudent. You might do it again ! "

XIX

She became Timon's secretary and private typist in his office. She had her own table in a corner. The door was nearly always open. People were constantly in and out.

Timon was never out of touch with the machinery. He kept an eye on all the wheels and their every movement reached that ear of Denys. That did not prevent him, in the midst of all the hubbub, from receiving fifty visits, attending to twenty matters at once, telephoning and dictating orders and articles, and talking to his secretary by snatches.

They were strange conversations, abrupt and impromptu in character. One had to be no sleepy-head to catch the ball on the rebound and send it back. One could trust Annette's eye and wrist, she had been a tennis champion in her day ; and her joints, which had been inclined to stiffen, soon became supple again. Timon roughly complimented her on it " for her age " : (he knew the number of her years ; she was not the woman to hide it from him). He had need of this verbal fencing, of these retorts. And she had no doubt whatever that the day she weakened he would cast her off like an old horse. It was by no means an easy life. He kept her in suspense from morning till night. Watching, catching his thoughts as they flashed, making them clear, polishing up his expressions, while tapping them on the paper, ears pricked up, ready for the attack and the reply . . . her arm shot out like a spring, and a good fist, well clenched, landed him one straight under the chin. . . . Timon laughed. . . . " I pocket that. . . ." She pocketed in turn. She went home in the evening dead beat. . . . And she would have to begin again to-morrow ? She began again next day. It did her good, at bottom. This incessant activity of the mind ever on the alert, was a gymnastic exercise to her, which rubbed the rust off the wheels and prevented her brain from growing dull with age. And the peril of the post sharpened her taste for life and her senses. They were quicker and surer. She did not complain of her labour.

The dangerous man she served paid her. Not only in money —he paid well !—but in confidence. Very soon he began to make her extraordinary confidences. He had, moreover, extracted from her certain confidences of which she was generally chary : and stranger still, she had let him do it, without

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taking offence at indiscreet questions. With an animal of this species there was nothing to hide—naturally, excepting what does not pertain to the animal ; the essential things to such as Annette. For all the rest what did it matter ? To him modesty was a word devoid of meaning. Free speech between the two.

To anyone who heard them—to all the ears on the newspaper—that caught snatches of their talk—Annette was Timon's mistress. And they fumed while they admired the slyboots.

Now, the one thing perfectly certain, both to Annette and Timon, was that the going to bed business did not come into it. No question of it !—“ And thank God ! ” thought Annette—“ And what the devil ! ” would have been Timon's thought. They were neither of them tempted. Timon ran after younger game. And Annette had had quite enough of being run after. . . . No, no, what made the bond between them was just that tacit security that in what concerns the animal ; there was no cause for alarm. Annette's power was due to the fact that Timon could not look upon her as one of those typists perpetually on the master's track, on the look-out for adventures. He was sure that she was quite prepared, from hour to hour, if he said a word, to get up from her table, tuck her hair under her cap and salute him with her chin : “ Good-bye, chief.” And for ever. There was nothing to stop her. And that was just what made him value her. A helper whose practical value he had weighed at the first glance, and who, while knowing how to get her exact due—he would have despised her if she had not—coupled punctual service with the most complete indifference—which is the acme of disinterestedness—was too rare for him to be such a fool as to deprive himself of her. But she ? What held her ? Was it only the post and the salary ?—There was himself. All said and done, he interested her. With no attraction, with nothing to bind them, they both felt that they were not ordinary animals. There was not a single point on which they thought alike, but still less did they think like everybody else. Each of them had made his own individuality, had not

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picked it up among the ready-mades ; it had been cut out of his own stuff, by scissors that cut hard, but right—personal experience. However different the cut and the stuff, they recognized each other as fellow-craftsmen. They talked without mincing words.

Timon had had more than enough of all the cringing backs, bending in fear at his roar ; of all the backsides offering themselves to his boot. Here, at last was a man—it was a woman : in German there is but one word for him or her who is of the great species—a human countenance, at last, that looked you in the face and said “No !” One who calmly inflicted on your criticism or reasoned blame—and who was right. . . . (One does not admit it, but one profits by it !) It does you good. It is solid earth. You do not sink in it. You can set your feet on it. Your head too. The great head that sometimes has such need to rest itself. But you do not show that. It is enough to look at that breast and say : “She has suckled a man. Those breasts have milk for hunger. And for sorrow, they are a pillow.” Without seeming to care a bit, he told the pillow, with often cynical mockery, the adventures of his life. He laid before her, without embarrassment, the naked Timon and his “beautiful soul”, which was not very savoury ; but like all others, it had once been that of a newborn babe, and would someday be that of a dying man. A true woman can always understand. And feel compassion. But she takes good care not to tell a proud man that. . . . It is understood, the male has no use for compassion ! It is an insult. But there are some insults—one even says outrages, sometimes—at which, secretly, one is not angry. It is only a question of being skilful in insulting, and that the insult should come at the right moment when, though the will protests, the flesh expects it. Timon was very well pleased with certain puckerrings at the corners of Annette’s mouth as she listened, in which there was one tenth of pity in dilution, with one tenth of contempt and eight-tenths of intelligent curiosity, free from prejudices. For the mixture, altogether, made a sympathy.

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Independent. That made its value. Timon's motto was, " Knock and take knocks ! but never give in ! Friend or enemy, never surrender ! " . . . Annette would never surrender. He had tried, and he was sure. . . . (That would not prevent him from trying again.)

A pact, half silent and half spoken, was established. He had taken Annette for his personal service. He dictated letters and articles to her in the rough. She put them into shape. She might clean the nails of his style, but not pare them. She might correct certain mistakes, but not all : she must not touch those he had made on purpose. For in the fight Timon did not care about truth. All he cared for was to " floor " his adversary. He did not take the trouble to explain everything to his secretary ; it was for her to guess—instantly—his intentions ! Timon did not let the ink grow cold. Dish up straight from the oven ! Burn your fingers ! And woe betide you if you let it fall ! . . . Annette's hand never flinched. . . . The master told her squarely of his ruses in action, all that lay under his articles, his conception of the newspaper and of life. He knew that she did not approve. But she accepted it as a play. And he had paid for her seat. She had no right to hiss. He told her so :

" Not that you don't want to ! I see you pursing up your lips. . . . All right, go ahead ! I give you leave, for once."

She went ahead. She hissed. He cut her hissing short with a gesture :

" Shut up ! . . . And now tap exactly what I said ! "

She tapped. It was Timon's fist banging the world on the head. He had to take his revenge.

XX

A bitter revenge. The rancour of a childhood of misery and shame. He was the son of a servant-girl in an inn in Périgord and a passing customer, whose face she had not even seen in the

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dark. She bravely succeeded in hiding her condition until the hour when, slaving like a harassed beast, she brought forth the child on the tiled floor of the room she was scrubbing on her hands and knees. They found her in her blood, with the child. It was too late to send the unwelcome infant back to where he came from. His squalling showed a powerful hold on life. But mother and child were sent away as soon as she was able to stand on her feet.

She never told anyone the life she led afterwards, and nobody ever troubled to inquire. She accepted anything, there was nothing, however hard and low, which she would not bear so that it brought her food : she held on to life with the inexplicable tenacity of those beasts that have nothing of life but its labour ; but the idea of leaving it never occurs to them. And she had that other tenacity—the grip of the female on her offspring, so long as he is not ripe enough to detach himself. After that, let him slide ! It is for nature to take charge of him ! When little Gueuldry hired himself out for the first time, he had seen enough to be already hardened to all shame. She had never tried to hide hers from him. Could she have done so in the promiscuity in which they lived ? She had staked all her virtue on the one card of this savage attachment to the flesh of her flesh—which did prevent her from being brutal to him. Brutality is a sign of strong love. That strength is not to the taste of the delicate. But Timon was not delicate, and never had been. He understood. He understood that being a child the very last rung of the ladder, he was the only one on whom his mother, who served as a doormat to others, could wipe her feet. It was in the order of things. . . . But, good God ! When he grew up he would know how to wipe his feet on the back of all the pile that weighed upon them both.

It was not achieved without sweat ! It did not do to be squeamish. For his first acquaintance with humanity was made from the feet upwards. As a little " boots " in a gloomy hotel, surreptitiously mixed up in the secrets of prostitutes and

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clients, he had one day, one hour, the chance, which he seized, of holding in his hands some compromising papers, forgotten by a traveller who had just left the hotel. In less than a minute he had vaguely realized their importance, weighed the chances for and against, and made up his mind. He caught the individual at the station ; and face to face, without a word too much (no question of blackmail ! but no doubt about it : the man gave in). He recovered his papers in return for a promise given and kept on the spot, to take his little accomplice into his service. The wary lad did not even take the time to go back to the hotel for his duds. He got into the starting train with the other.

He was a broker in rather strange international affairs, which hid themselves under cover of this very round, very frank Gaudissart. He had made himself the beater of a metallurgic firm, to get orders for artillery—playing weaver's shuttle between the cannon forges and the targets—that is the nations, or rather those who make use of them. His journeys took him fairly frequently to the Balkans and the Near East, everywhere where the tongue of man itches to lap the blood of his neighbours. The benefactors of humanity who use their ingenuity to furnish it with death toys, have always had a canine scent to discover customers burning with a desire to use them. In case of need, they manage to furnish the pretexts with the engines. Naturally, the humble, vulgar, paunchy beater did not see so far ! He contented himself with transmitting secretly, offer and demand, levying his share from both parties. Politics did not interest him. But the young pig from Périgord had the snout of the truffle-finder. He was quick to perceive that politics were the tree, at the foot of which the truffles grew. He cultivated the tree ; by his voyages, his soundings, his reflections and the acquaintance of well-informed adventurers (give and take), he came to understand *grosso modo*, then more in detail the structure of the tree, its main branches, its roots, the rotten teeth which it is wisdom to maintain, taking good care not to pull them out, and all the tumours, which are truffles for those

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who know how to use them in their cooking. He was not very long, either, in reaching the conclusion that it took very little genius to serve only one firm, like his master. Why not two? Why not three? Why not all of them? Playing them all equally false, of course. To the highest bidder! But if the lower bid is offered too, pocket it as well! Earthen platter or silver plate, truffles are good on any plate. It may readily be guessed that the young truffle-hunter did not master at the first attempt the dangerous art of bestriding several saddles at once. But the main point is that he did master it. He had a broad seat, and whenever he sat down there he stuck. His master had no time to find it out. When the hour was ripe the other got rid of him, with a turn of the hand. History does not quite say how. But the fact is that one day, somewhere in the Balkans, the old man disappeared from the field of his exploits, and no one ever thought of trying to trace him: of what interest was it?

It was not long before the Périgordian was smelt out by another animal of his species, who had the advantage of number over him: for the man with the chestnut hair and light eyes was one of that powerful band of "the Intelligence", whose mysterious freemasonry assures the domination of the British Empire all over the world—or, very likely, that of the herd: for those who have the game in hand, end by thinking that it belongs to them. The two animals sniffed at each other for a long time; and silently with bristling hair, they considered whether it would be more advantageous for one to strangle the other. But all things considered, the bigger, who was the better informed, saw that it would be more profitable to attach a truffle-finder of such build to himself. They openly discussed the terms of the bargain. Truffle-finder did not make them light, and the other did not waste time in haggling: the herd pays the price for what is worth it. But it intends to hold what it has paid for. And to hold the Périgordian the hold must be tight. The buyer had no illusions upon the point and he left the bought none. Gueuldry knew that he was selling his skin:

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he was not the man to worry himself about that, so long as he got a high price for it ; one could think about the rest afterwards ; he would serve his employer so long as it was to his own interest to do so ; the day his interest grew cold, he would manage to slip from between the pincers ; danger was not the thing to stop him. (We do not mention—we are serious !—the signature on the scrap of paper.)

Each knowing what to expect, they got on very well, on the whole, for the bargain proved profitable to both. Putting aside several bits of treason, of second or third importance, to which the Perigordian treated himself, here and there, to prove his independence to himself or else to keep his hand in. The other said nothing, but he showed that he had seen : double wisdom ! He did not let the rein be felt, but he held it : a nod is as good as a wink— ! Gueuldry knew that they were making allowances for him ; they did well ; he knew his own value better than anyone else. Well situated and instructed, he revealed a mastery, compact of audacity and shrewdness, in the intrigues of which his tenacious and ingenious masters disentangled the skeins, and wound the threads round the limbs of nations. They very soon discovered his special gift of the gab : the son of the Gauls has his best member in his mouth ; and they gave him the opportunity of exercising it by buying him a great French newspaper in Paris. They called it “*France, first !*” They were not lying ; it was her skin they wanted ! Timon—it was then that he came out of his shell—cynically proposed the title :

“ We'll get them ! ”

He did get them. And without loss of time. From the very first his tongue lifted itself above the towers of Notre Dame and like Gargantua, he swamped with words all the swallow-alls and gaping ninnies of Paris. He had come from their juice and he knew the sort of gravy that suited their stews. Every one of his dishes skinned the mouth. People rushed for them. He took good care not to coax. He welcomed his clients with a volley of insults. Rough treatment flatters the

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weak. Such roughness seems to them a homage paid to their virility, whose candle-ends it lights up again. The thing is to know the point at which the cudgel, instead of scratching the donkey, will irritate it. Timon knew it exactly. Never in his fiercest rages did he lose sight of the manometer or, if you like, the needle of the dial that jumps under the blow of the fist landed on the negro's head. He was cold in his furies, in his threats, and in his frantic campaigns. From the start he knew the "So far! Halt! Right incline!" The boar had other fields to devastate. Let us be clear! If the "so far" had not carried off the coveted spoil (this happened very rarely, the terrified game nearly always left a piece of its back in the pursuer's jaws; it would have jumped out of its skin, if possible to escape), it would be recovered another time. Timon never forgot.

Above all, he took care not to forget the real game which was being played behind the screen and the thunder of the devil's ballet—the great international battles between the firms, in which he had to serve his own. The ultra-nationalism of language was the necessary mask, of international interests. It was damned well indifferent to Timon and his peers (who were not peers of England. . . . Patience! They will be some day or other), and it was doubly damned indifferent to him whether it was under this or that flag that he cornered the steel market, and whether it was to be used in peace or war. Colour made no difference to the business; and the business welcomed all colours. True, at first, before the Great War, which was a massacre of ideas, almost as much as of men, Timon as well as his masters, still cultivated in a corner of their exploitation, the national flower, a rose with thorns, red with the blood it had cost; and it was even on this point that their games did not always agree. . . . War of the two roses . . . they cheated each other. But the Great War taught them that they would be very stupid to limit their field to the profits and losses of a single nation, when they had a chance of totalizing to their personal profit the ruin of all nations. If they had any scruples

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left, the newborn adventurers undertook to relieve them of them ; these adventurers had risen from the bottom of the seas, which the violence of the whirlpool had upheaved ; they were like Shakespeare's lawless bastards who trampled the world under their feet. Bastards of races, Levantines, Malays, made of mixtures of the rinsings of four or five continents, it was difficult to make out exactly from what land or what wombs they had come forth ; they had never troubled about it, they swam all the better in all waters ; and so much the worse for those aristocrats of the jaws, who claimed to choose their prey in the ready-made bed of their own fish-pond ! The new pikes snapped up everything. It was do as they did, or be done. Timon had no trouble in falling into step. It was not care for his origin that hindered him ; the word *country* rather reminded him of that of his *father* on whom he had to revenge himself. But as one cannot, in spite of the spirit, make oneself not of the flesh of a race, and as his was by the woman who had brought him forth, like the earth from which both she and he had come, trussed with the rough and savage Gallic raillery, the indelible odour of which sticks to the fingers, he revenged himself by the vigorous irony with which he judged himself and the rest of his band. He was never a dupe, like certain others, of the paternosters and pious pretexts, religious, moral, or social, in which these Tartuffes enveloped their rapine. He was pitiless towards hypocrisy and—at moments—yes, full of pity (but contempt had swept it away) for the exploited peoples and ready to side with them against the exploiters. But this pity went no further than explosions and bursts of furious language, especially at times when drink unchained the Titans crushed under the mountains, and made the crater smoke. He knew very well that the Titans were vanquished, and he was not one of those boobies who say : “*Gloria victis !*” He contented himself with “*Vae victoribus !*” because he knew them ; and whatever virtue might be left to him, he put into the hatred, secret, ferocious, bottomless, beyond measure, which he had for them, his accomplices or rivals. But the vanquished were no

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better : he had known them also, the exploited, these people among whom he had crawled in childhood ; their feet were no less heavy to those who were under them. Then let them stay under !—No, there was no fear that Timon would lend his broad shoulder to those who wished to overthrow the social order, though none of them judged that order—that disorder—with a more piercing eye. But that eye was just what he had been unable to hide from those who, like himself, could read between the eyebrows what was behind the forehead. And his masters, though they employed him, kept close watch on him. He made them anxious.

XXI

And by that very fact he reassured Annette a little. (Let there be no mistake ! she watched all the more because of it....) But she found a motive, however feeble, for indulgence and hope. So long as a man remains free and true in the depths of his spirit—though he be sunk in crime—all is not yet lost. For however he may be delivered in actions to the most shameful interest, he still keeps disinterestedness in his cave. And that secret disinterestedness, which in the end sometimes melts into total lack of interest in anything, was the invisible touchstone by which they had both, without any other explanations from the very first, tested and accepted each other. They could see and hear everything, about themselves and the rest, without flinching. They did not arrogate to themselves privileged treatment in their tribunal. They had not hypocritically, like the vermin, two measures, one for themselves and one for other people. They estimated the whole landscape exactly to scale, themselves included. The eye came first of all. For it is by the eye, it is said, that fish begins to go rotten. Sound was the eye of Timon. Sound the eye of Annette.

The master made no mistake about it. He hid nothing from those ears, whose shell, gathered in unmoved all the movements of the sea. He cast into them everything he had on his mind,

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of what he saw and knew of the human comedy in which he was an actor, and the clown-kings who led it. Those ears were his coffer. He told her so :

“ Mind the cash-box ! ”

“ You are the cashier,” replied Annette, “ you have the key. You have only to verify it. You will find your hoard complete.”

“ And nothing lost ? Nothing forgotten ? ”

“ Not a farthing. The sum is right.”

Yes, she forgot nothing that he had put in. It was dangerous. And who ran the greater risk ? The position of a troublesome depository, or one who may be suspected of being so, in those worlds, is not the most comfortable. The mere sight of those stranglers’ fists resting on the table, suggested this. But Annette looked at them indifferently and apparently even without giving them a thought. And Timon was ashamed of the shadow of suspicion that had come over him for a moment. No, nothing would come out of the cash-box. The key was in his pocket.

But the coffer was well filled. Annette got her political education. She penetrated behind-the-scenes. She learned to complete the saying of the Chancellor of Sweden, which the parrots of history repeat for us : he said with how little wisdom the world was governed : but he spoke only of the mannequins who are on the stage ; Annette saw those who pulled the strings. Assuredly, the sovereigns, parliaments and their ministers, all those who are called the directing powers, figure as mere marionettes with registered disks, to occupy the gallery ; all their wisdom put together would not furnish a ten-horse power to drive the enormous machinery of states. But others take it in hand, behind the curtain, and set it going, and those bell-clappers with it. The master ringers are Business and Money : Politics have had their day. Economics reign. And it certainly cannot be said that wisdom chokes them ! For they have not always a human countenance. They are often Octopuses, formless anonymous monsters, whose thousand

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arms grope, and whose blind trunks lap in the dark. And the few individuals, whose personalities, generally undesirous of making themselves conspicuous, still keep afloat in the vortex of myriads, are nearly all to-day artificial products without roots or seeds, without ancestors or descendants, without ties, associates or future. As they and their works are destined to disappear, they aspire to no more than their hour of super-power—but beyond measure. A frenzy drives them on. The wise “to-morrow” does not intervene in their destiny, to ensure its equilibrium and duration. They seem to say : “After me, the Deluge ! ” At least, the cynical and clear-sighted king who said it saw the deluge coming, calculating with secret satisfaction : “When it comes, I shall be gone.”—But they, the uncrowned kings, see nothing but their “to-day”; and nothing beyond. They would open the dykes for the deluge, if they thought its coming would bring them wreckage to pounce upon, before it washed them away, wreckage in their turn. Has not the oil king, for the last ten years, played the double game of stirring up the world of reaction against the Russian revolution and trying to treat with it against that world ?

Timon revealed to Annette the new powers that govern the nations. He spoke with unbounded contempt of the old professional politicians, and of the narrow circle of passions, prejudices and dead ideas, in which they blindly turn. In that, Annette agreed with him. The new masters achieved progress beyond the old, they repudiated superannuated nationalism ; they threw overboard its crushing and imbecile baggage of hereditary vanities, rancours, hates and pride, transmitted from father to son for centuries. They overthrew the barriers, they worked to found an internationalism of business and profits.

But it does not take long to discover that they are substituting for the old worn-out, worm-eaten collar, new chains much more enslaving. They have enlarged the prison ; but it is to get millions of men into it—no longer only the handfuls of professional politicians, who quarrel over every part in the play, but all the characters, the supers and even the public, the whole

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house. There is no longer any escape. Just as in the wars of the future all will suffer, civilians, women, old men, the helpless and the children, so in the model prison of international capitalism, everyone will have his number, not a single independent person will be tolerated. . . . Oh ! without violence. The mechanism will be so perfect that there will be no choice but to submit or die of hunger. Liberty of the Press and of opinion will be chimeras of ancient times. And never a country left to escape to from the oppression of others. The meshes of the net are being gradually tightened round the world.

" You shan't have me," said Annette. " I would rather go with the rats. I will gnaw the meshes."

" And where will you go ? " asked Timon. " There is no outside to go to. Everything is inside."

" There is death," said Annette.

" Does that satisfy you ? "

" No ! " said Annette.

She was raging.

Timon, amused at this, insisted on the strength of the net. Not a flaw : and he counted under that heading the moral scruples which still hampered the old political nationalism. The new Internationalism of money left the nations it exploited, and the back numbers of politics their old idealistic follies. It did business indifferently with friend or foe. It planned in expectation of war, and the death of one nation or another—yours or mine. Such was that Society of torpedoes, in which were associated the names of the princes of war, the great lords of Hungarian and German diplomacy, Bismarck and Hoyos, the great barons of the Anglo-Saxon forges, Armstrong and Whitehead, under the presidency of a French admiral, and under the control of a Levantine. Several *condottieri* of industry, several gangsters of finance, wearing round their necks, not the hangman's rope which they deserved, but the ribbons of all the orders of honours in the old West, played their game, not without noise, but without compass, amidst the Trusts and holdings of England and America, whose heavy hand weighed

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upon both continents. The power of the proconsuls or the shrewdness of the adventurers did not preclude their mediocrity. They did not so much govern the enormous forces, clashing or associated, as they were governed by them, and by their machinery once set in motion. This blind play of economic forces was but all the more overwhelming. According to the implacable rhythm of flux and reflux, they imposed alternately peace and war, fortune and ruin.

Timon astonished Annette by the pitiless clarity with which he probed the loins of these world masters, and the sterility of their copulations with money. He was eminently the player who could not express enough contempt for the incoherence of such a game. Those who aspire to usurp command should know what they want to do. They had no plan in mind—except to command—that is, in the language of those bags, to amass wealth. Oh ! for a man to come and rip them up ! Although his interests were on their side, and his whole destiny had made him an enemy of the Proletariat Revolution, in the depths of his heart he saw with a certain cruel satisfaction the serried masses, deep and organized, of the U.S.S.R. assembling before mounting to the assault, and he cried to them hoarsely, from the depths of the woods : "At them ! Attach the stomach !" But it was only the furious impulse of an instant. He could not ! He was against them. He *would* not understand them—although he was capable of doing so. He was one of the rare ones of his species who could have done them justice. If he had been born on their side, he might have been one of their leaders. Perhaps the thought had crossed his mind. But the chances of life had ordered otherwise and the thing had missed fire at birth. Speak no more of it ! He played a different game. Whatever the game he must play it thoroughly.

Did he do so ? That was the whole question. With her plasticity of sympathy, Annette had accepted Timon's view as a postulate to judge him by. For the moment she did not think of opposing it with other social conceptions : even sup-

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posing that Timon would have permitted it, she had none sufficiently firm and sure upon this subject of universal Economics, on which her individualism with wide wings, but restricted sky, had never had occasion to adventure. She knew the centre of the circle—the profound self—very well, but was ill acquainted with the circumference. Timon widened her horizons ; and however little reassuring the sight might be, her eager, ardent curiosity of mind soared into it like a swallow. She had no old world to defend. No old steeple which held her nest. Only her wings and the free air. (And there was the young swallow : Marc. But he was of her feather and would do as she did. . . .) So for the moment she had nothing to do but look. And her eyes were fully occupied. What duels of forces ! What a wild beast fight ! And people complained of the boredom of the times ! Pack of fools ! The rich epoch ! True, it is not very comfortable. It grazes the skin and scratches. Blood flows like water. But it is so interesting ! One has no time to think of one's troubles. Of those of others, at most. A famous spectacle ! Oh ! it is not a theatrical parade. The scenery moves like the " March of the Holy Grail ". But the scenery does not move alone. My eyes, my feet, my whole self, and the whole world are being dragged along. I feel against my cheeks the wind of the turning earth. Where is it going ? Where are we running ? I do not know. . . . But what a race ! It is good to be alive, at the prow. . . .

Better than all these men this woman perceived, from the first, the ecliptic in which the human mass was rolling, irresistibly carried along by elementary forces. And without seeking to resist them, but instinctively trying to identify herself with them, she tried to espouse the energy that was there, by her side ; and all judgment of its quality, moral or immoral, put aside, she would have liked to help it to realize itself. He was Timon. Then let him be Timon, whole and entire !

He was not this. Annette very soon perceived it ; and she

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was the first who had ever troubled about it. For Timon had under him a staff bound, without attachment ; and facing him, only rivals whose chief care was to deny him full scope. And he did not care himself—except by short fits and starts. This Colossus was intoxicated with the poison of power. A world infected to the marrow cannot be conquered with impunity. Wrestling with it skin to skin for forty years, one catches its sweat, its lice, and its typhus. Timon was voracious, violent, and unbridled in enjoyment. He must satisfy his lusts, his whims, and personal hatreds, on the spot. He could not, he would not, restrain himself, like some of the great adventurers, his rivals and models, such as Basil, or the oil king, or the match king, whose disequilibrium of power seemed prudently balanced by a respectable domestic life, keeping itself apart, and seeking to be ignored. He called them rats, misers, pen-pushers. They were, in reality, excrescences on the bourgeoisie, a cancer on its skin rather than new men. But Timon, who might have been a new man, let himself be hampered on his way, by the weeds twining round him, and the shifting mud under his feet. And it enraged Annette, for she was strangely seized with a passion for this destiny, which yet certainly inspired her with no sympathy : but she could not bear to see the failure of a natural force, which had known how to seize victory, and was now letting it fall. And Timon, who noticed this, was amused that his secretary's interest was stronger than his own. He was grateful to her for it. To find that he had a public that appreciated his strength was a stimulant which he had lacked too much. But it was very late for him to profit by it !

Yes, he knew as well as she, that he was more intelligent than the rivals against whom he fought ; he saw further than they did, better and more thoroughly. He saw their weakness, and the nullity of their constructions. He showed it to Annette in astonishing flashes of light.

“ Well then, chief ? ”

He looked at her quivering lips.

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" Speak, Madame Sans-Gêne ! "

" Why don't you put your shoulder to it ? "

" To prop them up ? "

" To overthrow them and build in their place."

" Show me the ground ! "

" All the earth."

" It is no more than a quagmire."

" Are you not capable, with your arms, of draining and filling up the marshes, if necessary ? And though everything should be under water, have there not been others, in former days, who built their houses, and their new lives, on piles ? "

" And what for ? To lay tadpoles in the marshes as they did ? No, no, those that are left are quite enough ! I don't care to add to the number, nor to perpetuate my race. One life is enough. I shan't begin again. But I mean, at least, to squeeze the juice out of the life I have."

" And afterwards ? "

" Afterwards ! Sh—— ! "

Annette turned her head away, frowning and irritated.

" Earache ? " asked Timon mockingly.

" No ! . . . Sick. Nausea."

She looked him in the face.

" What is the use of judging and despising others, who usurp dominion and are incapable of using it, only to do just the same as they do ? "

" But I see what they are not even likely to see."

" What ? "

" Their nothingness. Mine—yours. The nothingness of everything."

" Speak of your own if you like ! " said Annette drily, " but not of mine."

" What's that, what's that ? " said Timon, interested.

" You claim special treatment ? "

" That's my business."

" And you abandon me to mine ? "

" You abandon yourself to it ! Isn't it shameful ? You

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have been strong enough to tackle all the risks of life. And you go and knock up against Nothingness, like a coward ! . . . Pff ! . . . " (She blew out her lips) ". . . Nothingness is only one more enemy like the rest. Wring its neck ! . . . You sneer ? . . . Surrender to it ! . . . You disgust me."

Timon, quite pleased, looked at the angry cat, who seemed ready to spit in his face. His glance went round her.

" What a pity," he said, " that you are not of an age to take my seed ! In my default, it might have taken up the fight that tempts you."

" No need of you ! I have my own seed. And I very much hope that he will fight it to the end."

" You have your youngster. True. Bring him to me."

" No ! "

She shook her head resolutely.

" Not worthy of him ? " mocked Timon.

She said :

" No ! "

Timon burst out laughing.

" I like you," he said. " You're not afraid. I ought to have had a wife like you. Too late now ! You've missed the train."

" My train is the right one," said Annette.

" Well, let's roll along ! And you'll see that I can still attack—for lack of Nothingness who hides himself, the anonymous coward—all these damned holders of power ! "

XXII

Then followed hours of hard work—work of sapping, of mining, of circumvallation—while they awaited the clarion call, or the trumpet sounding the charge and assault. . . . For Timon piqued, in reality, by Annette's words, entered the lists again, and jostled gallantly with his great rivals. What had an Annette to do with all this ? . . . She asked herself

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the question, in the rare moments when the master left her breathing space. But then she had such fatigue, such hours of sleep to make up ! Away with thought ! Let me sleep ! We will meet again to-morrow.

But another—Marc—the Marc of whom she spoke so proudly to Timon—did not wait till to-morrow. He did not let her sleep. That his mother should have become the confidential secretary of Timon, Timon the shark, the land pirate, had filled him with consternation, varied by fits of fury. He had only heard it lately, having separated himself from her, and being in the sulks with her ; it was not in the poverty-stricken environment, where he hunted for bread, that he was likely to hear of Annette's relations with Timon. And the first news of it reached him at a particularly tragic time.

His comrade Masson, the compositor, had just killed himself. The poor wretch was eaten up by the double poison of syphilis and gas, both of which he had brought back from the war. His burnt-up body was unable to bear the furious assault of his mind. His disappointments and rancours were like oil to the torch. He spat blood, in useless barking at meetings, to awaken old fighters from their indifference. They turned from him with annoyance ; they were angry with him for reminding them of what they would rather forget ; and more than one hid discomfort with insult. He came away, worn out, choking with his pain and impotent rage, his brain in a fever, which insomnia increased to madness. A clear hallucination showed him the return of war, making fatal the hypocrisy of the peace of rapine, and the complicity, through weakness, of the French nation. The recommencement of the hell from which he thought he had escaped three years before, was beyond his endurance. And the moral treason of his own people deprived him of all reason for existence. He could do nothing. And had he been able, for whom could he have found the energy to fight ? For these traitors—traitors to their cause, traitors to their class ? For these cowards ?—One night, choking with

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coughing and despair, he cut his throat with his trench knife.

Marc found him on his straw mattress, soaked in blood, like a sponge, his body drained, his contorted mouth still barking at the treason of the living.

And it was that day that he met his mother in the street, near his door, coming to see him. He did not see the weariness in her face nor the dark rings round her eyes ; he saw her laugh. She was bringing him two concert tickets—she held them out, rejoicing at the thought of hearing beautiful music with her son. She told him so, happy, and out of breath from walking too fast. He started back, he sneered, with his hands in his pockets, and he said : “ No ! ” She did not understand, she thought he was involved in some love affair, which he would not explain to her. She said, effacing herself :

“ If you have a friend you would like to take to the concert with you, take these, my boy. I will go some other time.”

He snatched the tickets out of her hand, crumpled them up and flung them into the gutter. In a hissing voice, forcing himself not to cry aloud, he breathed in her face :

“ I want nothing from you ! ”

Annette stood with the smile frozen on her lips, her heart like ice. He did not give her time to speak.

“ Nothing that comes from that rascal, whose bread you eat, that assassin. . . . ”

She made a gesture to defend herself.

“ My boy, do not judge before hearing ! . . . The bread I eat is well earned. . . . ”

She took his arm affectionately. He freed himself with violence.

“ Don’t touch me ! ”

She looked at him. He was trembling convulsively.

“ You are mad, my boy. . . . ”

He cried, growling like an angry dog, his face advanced towards the woman’s mouth, so that passers-by should not hear :

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"There is blood on your hands."

He turned his back on her and strode quickly away.

Annette remained rooted to the spot where he had left her, her arms hanging down as she watched him walk away. In her amazement, her clear eyes scrutinized this explosion of hatred, and found in it elements of "*fas atque nefas. . . .*" An unavowed jealousy. She did not understand his melodramatic denunciation. She looked at her typist's hands. There was ink, not blood, on the finger-tips. She had not seen the blood of the dead man which was still under Marc's nails. She smiled sadly, shrugged her shoulders, and went back.

If he had but known what her relations with Timon really were! But how could she explain them to him? Did she explain them to herself? What was she doing in that galley, in that war of corsairs, which was not hers, and whose prize, disputed between the rapacious bands, was the earth, water, and air, by which she and her son, and millions of humble workers, lived? She had wanted to see. She was caught through her eyes, despite disgust and aversion, she was caught up in the game. It seemed to her, when she thought about it (never during the day, for she had no time, and rarely at night, when she slept, drunk with fatigue; but at long intervals, for a few minutes of insomnia. . . . Amazement, fear. . . . "What am I doing? . . . Where am I going?" . . . it seemed to her that she was like an explorer who had entered a jungle; he had made a compact with one of the huge animals and sheltered himself behind it; all around he saw the fight of the monsters, his fate was linked with that of the enormous beast before him, who broke down the wall of the forest, and trampled on tigers and pythons. She cried out to him: "Ware to your right, ware to your left! Raise your trunk! Crush, beat down!" But the heavy foot was always within an ace of crushing her, as well. The constant danger freed Annette from the ordinary scruples of conscience. She only thought: "To be out of the forest!" . . . And she now discovered that it was not only herself who was caught

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in that Forest, but Europe, and the whole world. Then she appreciated the mighty bulk and tusks of the elephant who cleared the way for her. She had no time to judge him, as she would, when she was out of the jungle. She had no time to be moral. She must follow the great feet. One moment of negligence or weakness, and she would be devoured by the prowlers! She went on and on; but she saw, and noted. She would settle accounts later, with herself and the universe.

She had quite expected from the first that sooner or later her son would call her to account. And she was preparing to supply him with one. She would not have told him—it cannot be told—that when among the mass of weaklings, the half-and-halves, the by the thousand, who are nothing, who do nothing, who are incapable of willing or acting, one has the good fortune to find an integral force, issue of the tree of good and evil, woman always remembers the Call, from which has come forth the immense effort, the unfoldment of human history. Even the most chaste, she who yields, not her body, but her mind, offers herself to the man who fecundates, to him who wills and acts. And she flatters herself that by canalizing it, she will direct his action. And then, more humbly, there is that care of the good workwoman, who, whatever the task with

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He had been assailed by the savage forces that prowled about at the bottom of his soul. And now they would not let him retract.

Annette wrote him an affectionate note, not even alluding to his brutality, containing no reproaches, but only anxiety about his state of mind, and suggesting that he should come and talk to her. She would have liked to explain herself loyally. And if her explanations failed to satisfy him she would have sacrificed her post with Timon for his sake. But she was not going to plead guilty, as his violence demanded : she had no reason to do so. And he took no account of reason or justice nor of any consideration. No consideration ! His anger required that she should break with this man, whom he hated, without discussion—and on the spot—and with an air of asking pardon ! He sent her an ultimatum in three imperious lines, without a single expression of affection. She read it, sighed, and her smile also grew hard. She had her pride as he had. She did not obey commands. All could be obtained from her by the heart, or by reason. Nothing by injunctions. She put the letter back in the envelope, and left it unanswered. And she continued on her way through the jungle, behind the living shield of the mammoth. . . . "I will wait till you are in the humour to talk politely, my little Marc. Do not wait for me !" He did the same. He was waiting. . . . You can both wait ! One pate was as hard as the other. Neither of them would say , " I was mistaken."

The person who would not wait was Timon. One had to follow him. No time to waste in sterile questions of conscience ! One had need of all one's senses not to be left behind. March on ! "Where are you taking me ?" "Keep on ! You will see." Did he know himself ? But without knowing it, his scent was infallible. It was not instinct alone. Timon had stored up a mass of lessons, both from experience and from books. For he had read greedily, and much more than people thought. And much more than books, he had absorbed the living. He knew them through and through. At the first

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glance he knew what was in each one, the weak point, the limitations—and at what price he could be bought. He had no respect whatever for shell-less animals, with soft flesh, incapable of defence, to him they were vile ; he took advantage of them without remorse. As to the strong and quick-witted who stood up to him, it was a duel with knives, all arms were good between them and him. If old Europe had been ripe—they were making it go rotten like a medlar on straw—they would have given points to the gangsters of Chicago.

But Annette overawed him—and all the more that she did not read him useless moral lessons. He felt that she was unbreakable, intangible, and yet free from prejudices. She never flinched before the worst spectacles. She judged them with a clear peremptory glance and without the intervention of any principle. She had no need of moral or religious crutches. She had her woman's eyes, proud and calm. They never blinked. They never lied, neither to herself nor to him whom they penetrated. And their freedom from illusion did not affect her joyous solidity. She loved life, but she would never (he was sure of that) have prolonged her life for an hour by accepting a condition infringing on her rights. ("Her rights", sneered Timon. . . . "I could crush them between two fingers! . . .") But he knew that even crushed there would remain, like the sting of the bee, the proud look that defied him). . . . A tough specimen, armed, like himself, magnificently for the fight. But she did not care for the fight for herself alone. She was a woman. To be interested in it she needed a man to fight for : son or lover—or, lacking these, a master. A man with whom she made one flesh. Timon saw her, brutally, in that light. She would have flown into a passion at the affront. But it was none, in Timon's opinion. He judged her with the eyes of the male to whom a woman's value is what she is worth with regard to man. She cannot have an existence of her own. And that this Annette, made for the fight, should have need of a man, in order to take part in it, as the blade seeks a handle and the hand that holds the

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handle of the knife, made him esteem her all the more. He appreciated the blade like a connoisseur.

From that fact alone, he took care of it. He did not use it to clean his nails. When he held it in his hand, he was brought to be mindful of his own actions. Her very presence was a curb upon him ; she stopped him on the brink of certain abuses.

XXIII

But nature only pauses to leap better. And when it is the nature of a Timon, beware of the jumps !

Among his vices, of which he had no small collection, Timon had that of drink. He was not alive to the refinement of poisons ; he practised the heavy intemperance of the porter who carries wine as well as he carries the cask. He was never empty, and his genius, if one may say so, was only flourishing when he was full. He was sufficiently master of his vat to know the degree and measure the line to which he could let the fermentation rise *coram populo*, not only without danger to his demagogic operations, but even with profit ; for he turned his fumes to advantage, like the man who made steam the servant of our manias. But he also needed, at long intervals, his hours to discharge, when the boiler got rid of excess pressure, or 'ware the explosion ! He generally arranged for these relaxations in private, outside Paris, as much as possible, in guarded and unknown places ; if any damage ensued, matters were so arranged as to keep them out of sight.

Annette knew enough about it, from her recent experiences in the Balkans, to imagine what went on, echoes of it, exaggerated, astonished, fearful, envied, reached the newspaper offices during the absences of the chief. When he returned, heavy and gloomy, like a cloud which has just burst and rises from the earth in a thick haze, Annette knitted her brows, hostile and icy, she assumed the impersonality of a machine which does the work the master imposes on it. He knew very

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well what she thought. It amused him. He would have tried to make her speak. But she guarded herself. It was not prudent to open the door. Once she was inside, she could not answer for the way she would come out. That was just what tempted him.

For several months he had tacitly, like herself, recognized this convention of a safety door, well closed, between himself and her. He did not care to introduce this woman with the too keen scent, to those regions of his life, those hunting grounds ; she would have been in his way. He considered her. Then, little by little, as he grew surer of her, he considered her less. He even wanted the very thing he put from him : to rub her nose in those marshes and see the grimace she would make. At bottom mortals always have an itch to degrade what they secretly esteem for refusing to be degraded.

He began by provoking Annette in her silence ; he tried to pique her curiosity or her pride. He said :

" You're afraid, eh ? . . . You would rather not know ? . . . Ha ! Virtue is more comfortable. . . . There is no risk of being tempted."

" By what ? And by whom ? " she replied disdainfully.

" You are too sure. At an easy price ! I should like to see you lose your head just once."

" I've seen it too often. And, thank God, I have passed the age for it. I have no wish to go back."

" Since you've passed the barrier, how can it hurt you to look at the other side ? What are you afraid of ? "

She gave him a black look.

" You know."

" Perhaps. But I should like to hear you say it."

" Of despising you."

He laughed harshly.

" I thought that was an accomplished fact, long since "

" But beyond what I can bear."

She had her chin on her two fists. She amused him. . . . All the same he felt like slapping her face. He got up and

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walked about to get over the impulse. He stopped, facing Annette.

"Well, I want to see how far you can. . . . The next time I go on the spree I will take you with me."

"No, no, chief, don't do that! . . . I beg you not to. . . . It is not a game one can play. . . . I spoke thoughtlessly. I beg your pardon. . . ."

He sniggered and they went on with their work. She thought that he had forgotten. But ten days later, Timon said to her :

"You will not go home to-night. I am taking you to La Garonne in my car."

She protested. He would not listen.

"You have no one expecting you. You are at my orders. I need you."

She said :

"Chief, this is serious. Reflect! . . . it may cost us dear, both you and me."

He mocked :

"Me?"

"Yes, you too. For I suppose you are not fool enough to lose, gratuitously, a helper like me, whom you are sure of."

"If I am sure of her why should I lose her? . . . Besides, my girl, if you think you are irreplaceable, you are mistaken."

"Very well! As you please!"

She went back to her machine with tightened lips. She was resolved to give in her resignation at the end of the day. Meanwhile, her pride whispered : "You are not a bit brave! You are running away. Aren't you strong enough! . . ." She would have done better not to listen to it. It is the devil in every woman. Timon knew it. He said nothing; but his mocking glance meant : "You're afraid. . . . My poor old thing, whatever of? . . ."

She would never have given in, though, if a young woman had not come in, in the evening, as they were finishing work. She was very young, very frail, and very pretty. She looked

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still a mere child. Annette saw that Timon was expecting her. She was very bashful ; dressed out like a little fashion-plate, she seemed awkward and unused to her pretty new finery.

Timon said to Annette :

“ Work’s finished ! . . . Get ready ! ”

And he went out for a moment. Annette got up, and pulled her hat down on to her head, muttering aloud between her teeth :

“ You can wait for me. I shan’t go.”

She was leaving the room like a gust of wind, when the little visitor, of whom she had taken no further notice, held her back timidly by the arm, whispering :

“ Oh ! madame, aren’t you coming too ? ”

Annette looked at her.

“ What does it matter to you ? ”

The child, without explaining herself, said, squeezing her arm :

“ Do come ! ”

Annette, who was still frowning, softened, and smiled at this sudden gush of confidence. She looked closer. There was a mute appeal in those eyes. By one of her absurd impulses, she immediately felt like a brooding hen, spreading her wing. It was but a flash. But just at that moment Timon, coming back into the room, seized the situation at a glance, and said with mocking unconcern :

“ You will be the chaperone.”

Annette had not made up her mind when she stood in the street before the open door of the car. This little girl, who, without knowing her, trusted her, and implored her help. . . . She got in.

She did not remember much of what was said on the way. The master was seated in front, blocking the opening with his bulk. The two women sat at the back. They did not talk to each other. The little girl’s fingers unwittingly clutched the folds of Annette’s dress. The latter took advantage of a moment when Timon, remembering a telegram he had to send,

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stopped the car before a provincial post office, to extract some scraps of explanation from her companion. The girl came of an Italian working-class family of the Marshes, which had emigrated to Languedoc. A beater had discovered her in a confectioner's shop. He had dangled before her eyes a prize in one of those beauty competitions, organized by those master-pimps, purveyors to royalty. In default of the prize, compensation came in the guise of an engagement in a music hall, from which she would have liked to run away as fast as she could, on the first night, when she found herself exhibited naked to the greedy eyes of the hall. Instead of flying, she fell into such a state of inhibition that she seemed paralysed : nothing could rouse her, neither the shouts of laughter nor the curses of her manager. But if the spectacle of this brunette, bending her neck, her head turned over her shoulder, her arms awkwardly pressed to her body, had excited the hilarity of the spectators, it had not been lost on Timon : his choice fell upon the victim. For some weeks she had been apprenticed, drilled and decked out in a so-called fashion designer's office, and on the appointed date, the goods were delivered. The girl knew nothing of Timon but what she had heard in mysterious terms ; it was enough to make her tremble, and the sight of the ogre had been the finishing touch. She certainly had some idea of what she was letting herself in for. And it did not do to exaggerate the innocence of the victim. If in offering herself to the sacrifice she did not know exactly what it would be, she was ready for the sacrifice. Anything to escape from poverty ! The Iphigeneia knew that she would not get out of it without paying. But her little peasant's imagination had not foreseen the payee. In her first fright—one does not stop to think !—she had thrown herself upon the first protection that offered. It was absurd, since she did not know Annette. But tracked beasts always scent around them the least particle of pity. All this was more guessed than expressed in a confusion of hurried words in mixed Italian and French. What completely gained the child's confidence was that Annette immediately

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answered her in her own language. It was like a breath coming from her Adriatic. She kissed the palms of Annette's hands!

"Bella buona signorina, mi remetto nelle sui mani, come nella santissime della Madonna! . . ."

Timon was coming back.

After a three hours' journey they arrived in pitch darkness at a château in a forest, surrounded by several kilometres of enclosure. It was impossible to find out the name of the place. Timon had more than one of these rendezvous for hunting and pleasure scattered about France, and outside it. They were immediately received and surrounded by a silent staff of servants. After the women had been conducted to their respective apartments to attend to their toilets, they were respectfully fetched and escorted to the salons on the ground floor where supper was waiting. There was a round table for two dozen guests, men and women of divers nationalities. No one troubled about introductions. The men knew each other. And as to the women, it did not matter whether they knew, nor perhaps that they should be known—except in private. Annette could put the name to three or four hard faces that had passed her in the chief's room, and of course they recognized her. They were rather surprised at her presence. They did not know exactly what her relations with Timon might be and in the doubt they paid her their rather lame respects. Annette received them as her due, pulling up the stumbling by an indifferent and rather haughty carriage of the head, which gave her an air of not hearing. Her eyes wasted no time. They explored the lives concealed behind the faces. She catalogued them, helped by memories of her conversations with Timon, and the descriptions he had given of them. She recognized an old gentleman, with a wrinkled crown, who seemed to laugh and watch with every line of his occiput, as well as with his little red-rimmed eyes; thin, bent, chilly, looking like a little retired bourgeois—he was an American metal-king. And that other bourgeois, a great bourgeois, very French, very stiff and straight-laced, with the

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ways of a notary, and a commander in musti, he was an iron-master and a deputy. Further off was a handsome young man, tanned, broad-shouldered, and hampered by his dress suit, with a fascinating smile and steel-grey eyes, which at their first contact with Annette, exchanged a gay, friendly greeting with her. What was his nationality ? He spoke every language with an Irish accent, he looked very frank, masculine, and charming. A word from Timon to Annette told her that he was that famous agent of the Intelligence Service who, in all sorts of disguises, made and unmade kingdoms in the East. Other agents were not lacking in the respectable company. Some of them bore great names—a nobleman with fine manners, a long narrow head, haughty, courteous and absent-minded—others of lesser rank, stank of dollars : one of them, at a Disarmament Conference at Geneva, had just spread the alarm in the Press that the American Admiralty had given assurance of the success of a programme of new naval constructions. A little fat man full of southern glibness, who smelt of garlic and pinks, and combined Don Quixote with Sancho, spread himself in effusions and protestations of devotion, squeezed hands in his moist hands, and kissed Annette's palms with noisy full-mouthed kisses, rounding his back before her, and cracking up Timon, with emphasis, with ecstasy, almost with tears in his eyes. At table he mingled the erotic and the mystical in his conversation. He was a master-blackmailer, a Press pirate. . . . One never knew to what extent rascality gave way to sincerity ; he was not always sure himself. For the beautiful soul and the dirty rascal, by some unknown divine decree, were yoked together in him for life. They would only be disentangled at the Last Judgment. Meanwhile, it was profitable for the master, and his rivals, in this house, to employ his talents and, above all, there was danger in refusing to employ them. The whole assembly was none too reassuring. But parties like to-night's were a truce of God to all. A man must needs enjoy, at times, the company of men, though they be enemies, to pool good fortunes and exploits. After

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all, were not their very rivalries their chief reason for existence?

And it was a pleasure to them to lay down their arms for a few hours and meet round a table, watching each other over the dishes and the bare shoulders of the women, without neglecting the contents of the dresses and the dishes (excepting the dyspeptic American metal-king, for whom wine and women seemed to have no existence, and who, adhering strictly to his regimen, sipped at his boiled egg, and quenched his thirst with mineral waters).

We do not describe the women : they were part of the repast, and the menu does not interest us. They were beautiful or ugly, but all choice, not all young, but all calculated to excite appetite ; not all venal ; several had a profession, of the stage or the pen ; but all had the vocation. The little novice of Ancona was the pick of the table. Annette was a surprise in such an environment. And Timon himself seemed rather uncomfortable about it ; he was sorry now that he had brought her with him.

But it was she who saved the situation. Proud and amiable, she did the honours of the table. She would have been taken for the mistress of the house. And Timon did not interfere. She sat opposite to him ; on one side she had the old gentleman, greatly concerned about his health, who talked to her about his grandchildren, works of charity, and infant asylums, he might have been a Vincent de Paul—on the other side she had the handsome young man, who made no bones about calling the good old man an old alligator, in his neighbour's ear, and who merrily related some adventure in disguise, among the Arabs or in India ; he proved himself a great connoisseur in dress, make-up, and ointments. . . . But her neighbours did not prevent Annette from watching over the rest of the table ; without appearing to do so, she directed the service, and the trend of the conversation. It had only taken the servants a few minutes to look for orders from her glance : and the best of it was that the guests had caught the tone without her

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seeming to set it for them. The music was far from aiming at academic correctness. Annette was too good a Gaul not to know the just rights of a free assembly, and even since she took part in it, not to regard them as her own. She knew how to relate some roguish story quietly, without emphasis, in her rich, well-modulated voice. And more than one among the men who listened had wits alert enough to appreciate the restraint of the wording in the licence of the tale. Timon was secretly flattered by the unexpected success of his filly ; he saw her in a new light ; he appreciated, like a connoisseur, "the honest lady" who, never going beyond the line between too little and too much, jested so dexterously with her tongue—and with her palate, for she did not sulk at her plate. She was fitted for all combats, and she kept her equilibrium in all. The beauty of it was that without any effort she made others keep theirs too.

But all the same, that was not what they had come for ! And at last, rising from the table, Timon, taking Annette aside, with such regard as he had never shown her before, and a few blunt compliments, which rather flattered her—what woman is insensible to them ?—invited her to dispense herself from the rest of the evening, which might be noisy, and to go and rest in the room which had been prepared for her. She quite understood that he was asking her to leave the field free for them ; and he insisted rather too much on the right which her age gave her to go and rest after a tiring day. But under the heavy lack of gallantry there was an affectionate attention, and even a shade of respect, which she was not used to from him. She read in his eyes that he wished to save her from the risk of incidents in which her presence would be out of place. She was grateful to him for it—and all the more because Timon's first intention in bringing her there had been to subject her to that affront. There was still the little girl she had promised to watch over. But (simplicity must not be exaggerated !) she realized that it was a ridiculous rôle ; one did not come here to look after young ladies ! And it was not at

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the moment when Timon surrendered his arms and seemed to say : " Pardon ! Your place is not here. You were right "—that she was going to answer : " I stay to save virtue. . . ." Whose ? That lamb's ? After that she would only have to win her stripes in the Salvation Army. . . . She laughed and said gaily :

" Thank you, chief, for relieving my guard ! I give you the pass-word."

" And what is it ? "

" Head clear."

" Head clear. Yes, that's just the word for you. Go to bed, clear moonlight ! "

They parted affectionately. Before leaving the room, to satisfy her conscience, she looked round for her protégée. She saw her in a group, laughing, smoking, a wee bit tipsy (two fingers of drink went to her head) ; she took no notice of Annette's withdrawal.

On the threshold Annette passed the old American, who was not more curious than herself about the rest of the evening, and like herself, was virtuously retiring to rest. He rewarded her with a little bow of understanding, and a fleeting glance of approval. She retired to her room on the first floor at the end of a quiet wing of the house, with windows looking out on the great park. She was tired, and it was pleasant to stretch her " clear moonlight " (she laughed at it) between the cool sheets. She was not ill-pleased at her evening. She had not got off so badly, for her age, from a game which was not without danger. . . . " For her age ! . . . " It was her age which had helped her to get out of it. But how would the game finish for others ? Who loses wins, according to the ordinary rules ! . . . " Bah ! I am very silly to think of it. . . . " She took a finely bound volume, haphazard, from a little glazed bookcase beside the bed, to distract her thoughts ; she read a little, smiled, dreamed, and fell asleep with her fingers still between the pages.

An hour went by, perhaps two, and she had never moved.

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When she awoke—it was still night, a clear, moonless, summer night—she was, as it were, anticipated by a distant call, and a feeling of remorse. The soft bed engulfed her, seeming to say, "Don't move! Stay here!" But a vague feeling of anxiety arose. She raised herself on her elbow. The agitation did not come solely from within. There were noises, and indistinct gleams, in the night. She listened intently. She did not take long to understand. . . . "Their heads are no longer clear! . . ." She shrugged her shoulders and lay down again. . . . All the same they seemed to be going it strong! . . . Howls could be heard. And a concert of barking dogs. . . . She got up and opened the window. . . . The room was in the corner of the left wing, in a recess, and on the right, quite near, the main part of the building hid the view of the gardens. She could only see above the curtain of trees the reflection of moving lights. And there was the din of a hunting horn, and redoubled barking. . . . Piercing shrieks. . . . She hastily threw on some clothes, and went out of her room into the corridor looking for a window from which she could see. Near the grand staircase she found a door with a balcony looking on the front. She looked out and thought she must be dreaming. . . . Hunt servants holding torches. Dogs held in leash, barking and dancing a St. Vitus's dance. And naked women flying across the lawn. . . . Diana's hunting. . . . But here it was Diana who was being hunted. Then, amidst shouts of laughter and fanfares, there emerged from a grove, four huntsmen in red coats, carrying on their shoulders, like a doe, tied to a pole by her hands and feet, with her head hanging down, a naked nymph, who, truth to tell, did not cry out in the style of the gods: a stout girl, by Jordæns, spitting and choking with rage. The bevy of spectators, much amused, were holding their sides with laughter, and retorted in words no more winged than hers.

Annette's first feeling, at the sight of this nocturnal hunt from the balcony was :

"The idiots! . . . And this is what they have invented!

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. . . These clodhoppers (the name was never so well applied !) who imagine themselves playing the Borgias ! . . . These fatheads inspired by pictures in serial stories ! . . . Their poetry : Dumas papa and Octave Feuillet. . . . Aren't they ludicrous ! The last romantics of the *Tour de Nesle*."

But her contempt had no time to grow pitiful of their silliness. . . . Here they were bringing another victim to the edge of the lawn, who took the *Tour de Nesle* seriously ! . . . The little naiad of the Adriatic, dying with fright, hiding her face in her hands, and displaying her fine, frail nudity. . . . Annette realized that the cruel game would remain a game, that the howling pack would not be loosed, and that the hunting of Diana would cost the nymphs no more than a fright. (Shame and modesty were not taken into account ; they were paid for. . . .) But it was too much for the poor child, huddled with fear, ready to fall on her knees, and surrounded by the gambols of the dogs, and the brutal chorus of tipsy men. Annette jumped with anger as she saw Timon apply the back of his broad hand to the plump behind of the little statuette, bawling in her ears :

" Run for it ! Or my dogs will make a supper of your buttocks ! "

Annette did not allow herself a moment's reflection. She was already running downstairs, never noticing that her feet were bare. She came out on to the terrace where the guests were grouped, at the very moment when the terrified child bounded wildly over the lawn, amidst the acclamations of the delighted spectators. And Timon holding his big dog by the collar, waited for the moment to release him. Annette knew the dog ; she knew that he was not in the least dangerous, a great playful beast, knocking everything over, and not savage. But the flying doe did not know it. Annette pushed her way violently through the astonished spectators, and emerging in front of Timon, she seized him by the lapels of his coat :

" Stop it ! Timon, you're drunk ! "

Timon, rolling terrible eyes, loosed the dog, who rushed off

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in pursuit, and brought his fist down upon Annette's mouth. She fell back under the blow, but standing out against him, in the sudden silence that had fallen, she exclaimed :

" You're a coward in your cups."

Her mouth was bleeding. Timon raised his terrible fist again. But he saw her mouth. His fist fell. And coming up behind him in four strides, the handsome young man of the Intelligence, seized his wrist and held it fast. . . . The little girl on the lawn was shrieking for help. The big dog had caught her, and jumping up, put his paws on her shoulders and knocked her down, rolled her over and gambolled joyously, barking with his tongue hanging out. Casting a last defiance at Timon, Annette turned her back on him and ran towards the fallen child. She had no trouble in rescuing her ; the dog let her do as she pleased, dancing round them and waiting for congratulations. But it was not easy to reassure the terrified victim. She had given herself up for dead. Annette lifted her by main force, and with her hands and linen wiped the young body wet with tears and night dew, and the saliva of the conqueror. Holding her close Annette wrapped her long coat round her as well as she could, and so, both naked or half-naked, she brought her back, still trembling, towards the house. The terrace was nearly empty. Timon had given orders, and had disappeared. There remained but a few servants holding torches, who hastily made way for them, and in the hall a few curious men watched, at a distance, the strange entry of the Juno with a bleeding mouth, and haughty head, who did not deign to notice their presence. She supported the chicken cowering under her wing. An old, very correct servant, who seemed as if nothing could surprise him, escorted them respectfully in the lift, to Annette's room. The child implored Annette not to leave her, and she put her protégée into her own bed. Then for the first time she perceived, by the round red mark left on the child's forehead by her kiss, that her mouth was wounded. She washed and examined it ; one of her fine teeth, a canine, was broken. A war wound. She was

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lucky that the rest of the jaw had resisted ! But the enemy had fled. She lay down on the field of battle. She got into bed beside the little girl, who, after crying a good deal, fell into a troubled sleep. She herself did not sleep a minute. She had sharp shooting pains in her face, and fiery points in her eyes. She had time to think out her plan for the morrow.

The morrow had begun. Dawn was breaking. Annette got up before six, dressed herself, rang the bell, gave her orders, and got ready. Then she woke her companion, who fell back upon the pillow :

“ Upsy ! You can sleep in the car. . . .”

She had almost to dress her. Annette’s hand drew her along. Downstairs they found Timon’s powerful car before the door. Annette spoke and acted with the air of the master. And the servants, whether overawed by her tone, or—more likely—Timon had given his orders, bowed down before her, as though the master indeed she were. The child fell asleep again almost directly, heavy with the grief and wines of the night before ; Annette propped her head between the cushions ; and with weary eyes, dreamily watched the white road between the hedges, the fields, towns, and smoke—and her battles with life glide by like the reel of a cinema. She deposited her charge, who was awake at last, at her address in Paris ; and went home herself to take her well-earned rest.

Her heavy sleep was broken by intervals, when in the throbbing of her wound there rose the clear consciousness of one single well-defined thought :—“ Finished Timon ! . . .” And yet she was not at all surprised when, towards evening, just as she had fallen peacefully asleep, at last, she was roused by the ringing of the bell. She had no doubt about the name of the visitor. And having got up to open the door, it seemed to her quite natural to see Timon’s mighty bulk framed in the doorway. They exchanged no greeting. Her gesture said “ Come in ! ” and she preceded him. He followed, walking sideways along the narrow passage. With a quick movement she threw back the bedclothes over the open bed. But she

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did not look in the glass. She only drew her dressing-gown closer, signed Timon to a low chair, sat down herself in an armchair near the window and waited without a word. Nothing in Timon's face betrayed his intentions. He was gloomy and worried. He knew what he meant to say. He had no intention of apologising. But at the sight of that face with the stern eyes and swollen mouth, he forgot what he meant to say ; he could see nothing but her mouth and, awkwardly, for the sake of saying something, he asked how she was. "Well," she said coldly, without troubling to say more. And seeing, after a few moments' further mutual scrutiny, that his eyes never moved from her wound, she said, pointing to it :

"A pretty piece of work ! . . . Are you satisfied ? "

And she showed the broken tooth.

Timon clenched his fists with anger and cursed against himself.

"Swine ! "

Annette continued to look him up and down. He said :

"Abuse me ! "

Annette replied disdainfully :

"It's unnecessary. You do it for me."

"What can I do ? . . . Pay for your tooth ? That's not enough. If one of my dog teeth could only replace it ! . . ."

"No," said Annette, "don't mention dogs ! "

Abashed and agitated, Timon asked :

"What do you want ? An indemnity ? "

"To begin with, you would do well to beg my pardon."

Timon was not in the habit of begging pardon. Crush or be crushed ! Pardon, asked or given, was not in vogue ; it was a waste of time. It would have struck him as more natural if Annette had broken one of his teeth. She saw his hesitation and said :

"But don't do it, if you don't think of it of your own accord ! I don't care ! I would rather warn you that it would not alter my decision."

"And what is it ? "

were circulating about the night at the château. They did not tally very well, but the fact established beyond dispute was that the woman had had the last word in the affair. . . . A first-rate schemer. And how well she managed to hide her game ! . . . She kept her place, she affected the same zeal in executing the master's orders ; she never expressed her opinion in public unless he asked for it, and in the presence of a third person she always addressed him with the formal "*vous*". But they knew that "*vous*" became "*tu*" as soon as the door was shut, and that she had discussions with him in which Timon had learnt—the most difficult thing for a despot of his kind!—to listen without interrupting. They revenged themselves for this hidden power (on which they ought rather to have congratulated themselves, for it had a calming effect on Timon) by atrocious jokes. Without knowing them, Annette was sufficiently acquainted with human malevolence to suspect them ; and she had reached a state of bitter disdain which made her indifferent. It was not the virtue that Timon valued least in her, for his own disdain was pulverizing. The mystery was that instead of trying to profit by the situation for herself, she took Timon's interests to heart.

His interests or his interest ? (In the classic century they would have pompously said : " His glory ! . . ."). Yes, she wished that this force heaped up on nothingness should at least build its pyramid above the sands. She wished to use the influence which, for the moment (for how long ?) she enjoyed, for that purpose. And secretly she had planned the course upon which she was trying to spur him. Living in the midst of all the intrigues elaborated by the great highwaymen, barons of industry and business, her political education had taken form ; and her instinct drew her, without her knowing much about it yet, towards the parties that strove to assure the defence and revenge of the exploited. The U.S.S.R. so calumniated, misrepresented no less by the childish tales of ignorant tourists, who passed through and described it in a fortnight, than by the poisonous inventions of the professional

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liars of the enemy Press, remained an enigma to Annette, but an enigma that attracted her. She fully realized that therein alone lay the necessary counterweight to the crushing mass of reaction which was bending the back of the West ; and so far without any maturely considered plan, she was trying to draw the decisive weight of Timon to that side of the scale. Did he see it ? Probably. Perhaps he could read the gropings of her thought better than she did, and knew whither its trend would lead her. But being in no hurry to push her on to it, he pretended to be mistaken. He said, teasing her :

" You play the mahout seated on the elephant's neck. You want to train him. But train him to what ? Do you even know ? To march through the streets and be acclaimed by a crowd of idiots ? That's done, I'm fed up with it. To make myself the rampart of the city ? What city ? A man like me hasn't got one. To build, what ? A triumphal arch, to pass under it like that dwarf of a Napoleon ? Everything one builds is a tomb. I want no tombs to hut myself up in. I need space to move about in so long as I am alive. I go to the right, I go to the left, in the forest, and destroy what is in my way. Duck down ! Look out for your head ! "

" Even if you are only made to destroy, Timon, at least, know how to destroy ! Not haphazard ! Make the opening ! Go to the end ! You stay trampling in one spot. Make up your mind ! Go forward ! "

" Where's that ? "

" You know better than I do. Don't pretend not to understand ! You can see very well that a great duel is going on. Who are you for ? "

" For myself."

" That's not much. At least, Timon, be that ' myself ' whole and entire ! Let it be no, or let it be yes, nothing by halves ! "

" The game is the game. The colour changes according to chance."

" I play mine. If I were like you I would play it at the gaming table."

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"To have nothing more to do with you."

Timon twitched his terrible eyebrows ; it was clear that a struggle was going on in his head and in his quivering hands. Then he said :

"I cannot force you. . . . Ah ! I don't say but that if I could . . ." (and his hands twitched once more. Annette saw him as Assurbanipal and herself with her back beneath his foot. . . .) "But if I were to ask you ? . . ."

It was on the tip of his tongue to say : "How much do you want ?" But his instinct warned him that to mention money at that moment would be the surest way to a complete rupture. He said, he was surprised to hear himself say :

"If I begged you ! . . . If I . . ."

For a moment he had been watching Annette's bare foot half out of her slipper, which she was swinging, her legs crossed, haughty and absent-minded. And before he had time to think, he had bent down, seized it, and pressed his thick lips upon it.

Annette did not stop to think either. She did not moderate her repulsion. Angrily she dragged her foot violently away from the mouth that ventured to take possession of it, even in homage ; and in so doing she grazed his lips roughly. She was furious. So was he. He growled :

"Do I disgust you so, then ?"

She breathed :

"Yes !"

Ah ! how he would have loved to crush her ! . . . but he mastered himself ; the great head, conquered, bowed down :

"Pardon !"
ever desire & an unaccustomed
whose we

Annette saw herself as Assurbanipal in her turn. And it was she who crushed the shaven crown of the negro king under her heel. It was but the vision of a moment. It was as if she had done it. Her toes quivered with satisfaction. Then she said, appeased :

"The honours of the foot. . . . End of the chase. . . . Come, Timon, let's have done with this business !"

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Timon raising his head . . . (this damned woman non-plussed him) . . . saw Annette's mouth—the wound lightened by a hard smile. . . . All the same, the broken bridge was repaired ; he crossed it.

"Let's have done with it. I take you at your word."

"I have not said it. I have not stated my conditions."

"You are not going now," he said, reassured.

"I have not said so."

"You just spoke of conditions. I accept them. So you are not going now."

"Well," said Annette, shrugging her shoulders, "I will stay till the matters in hand are settled."

"Good!" said Timon. "That won't be to-morrow."

Annette regretted her imprudent words. Timon saw it, and did the handsome thing :

"I don't want to keep you against your will. If you find it too hard to put up with me after the scene last night, I understand it : leave me ! I need you ; you are much more than a secretary to me ; you are a curb. But it is no joke to be a curb to an animal of my kind. I acknowledge it. You have every right to say 'Enough !' You are free. I am not worthy of you."

Annette was touched. She said :

"I will stay, Timon ; so much the worse for you ! And so much the worse for both of us ! So, the curb or the teeth, will have to be broken."

"Try to let it be mine next time !"

XXIV

Outwardly Annette's position in the newspaper office was unchanged. She returned to her seat at her table near Timon's desk. But the change in the master's tone, and his attentions to her, were soon remarked. As a matter of course, the swollen mouth had been a source of gossip, and the most fantastic tales

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" Yes, I can see you before the green cloth at Monaco. You would stake to your very shirt."

" I never gamble. For I know myself. It's not my shirt I would stake. It's my life."

" It is, my child. You are not aware of it. By being with me you stake your life, or you will. They've got their eye on you."

" I've staked my life more than once. Bah ! I am always sure of winning."

" Like all gamblers ! "

" Aren't you a gambler ? You've just said so."

" You only stake your skin. You can stake it. It is your own."

" And you, who owns you ? "

" I don't play alone. In every game one has to take into account not only the adversary (that is the pleasure ! . . .) but the partners too. A rubber."

" And is that what you call being free to come and go in the forest ? "

" It is what I call the forest."

" Break it down ! "

" You talk like a woman. I can only clear myself a round. But the forest covers the world. It holds us. . . . And what does it matter to me ? "

" It matters to me. If it held me, I would set fire to it."

" And burn with it. . . ."

" So long as it burns ! "

" And long live the Revolution ! Would you like a ticket to Moscow ? The red forest burns well ! And I don't say they're wrong ! They say the earth is more fertile after it has been burnt. But it will no longer be the earth where I shall be. I am on this one. I'll stay there."

No, it was not easy to get him out of the social thicket of the old world. He had enough to do to cut down his own share. His share was a large one. But he only got it by conceding ~~theirs~~ (give and take) to the other great filibusters. They were

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bound by the duel itself. Steel against steel. Annette discovered that one can be a master of the world and be less free than he who has nothing. On condition that he who has nothing has a soul—or (what comes to the same thing) thinks he has. But they are rare. The majority have none, or (what comes to the same thing) are unaware of it. Annette was in the power of a soul (as one might say : in the power of a husband). Not that she attached a question of survival to it, an after-death assurance. When one is really a soul, one has not the sordid mentality of an owner who holds on to it, ever trembling lest it be stolen from him.

"I do not own my soul. My soul owns me." Timon might have answered :

✓ "So you are not free either!" True. Who is free? We are all pieces on the chessboard. And who plays us? ✓ ?

But all the pieces are not of equal value. Annette was the queen on the chessboard on which Timon was the castle. She influenced the game. It was no small thing that by contact with her the Minotaur grew more human, and showed himself capable of generous impulses now and then. True, he had never been without them ; he indulged in them at long intervals ; but he looked upon them as an illness and treated them with doses of quinine and cynicism. There was in him the double stuff of a blackguard and a hero ; and one never knew which side was the lining ; for he could turn his coat in an instant. Until the regency of Annette, it was generally the blackguard that he more willingly displayed. Annette knew how to oblige him to use the other side of his coat. With no great effort she obtained from him liberal subscriptions for many works of public interest, less charitable (he distrusted those) than professional, educational, and promoting the development of groups and individuals. In cases for private assistance he gave Annette *carte blanche* : nevertheless she kept a regular list for him. He hardly glanced at it, however, and she knew she must not bother him. One of the first to benefit by it was the little doe of the Adriatic, who was repatriated,

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and established in her town in the south of France. ✓ She was now married, and was suckling a little fawn, who slept against her breast, and perhaps trembled when he heard the dog bark in the depths of the wood. ✓

But the greatest service that Annette did Timon was to regulate his action, leaving nothing to caprice, making him aim at his goal, and having reached it to aim further, without allowing others to pick up the game, and without wasting his time in escapades. And naturally she turned him in her own direction, which was becoming less instinctive and more reasoned from month to month : in the direction of an international social transformation organized round about that heart of the cyclone, the U.S.S.R. In a few months the results were so apparent that his partners grew uneasy, and were not long in tracing them to their source. Annette received strange advances from men who were interested in controlling Timon's secret plans, and in keeping him to his dissolute life : for they had no illusions about the pleasure it would give their ally and associates to wring their necks if he could ; and they feared his intelligence. It suited them that he should squander half his energy by the way. Annette was given to understand in veiled words that they would be grateful if she would attend to it. But the icy irony with which the woman replied robbed them of any wish to pursue the matter. Timon had a good laugh when he heard of this, and a vindictive gleam shone in the elephant's eye. Annette took advantage of his rancour to work double tides with him, and in this burst of activity he whisked a magnificent piece of business which his rivals thought themselves sure of, from under their very noses.

" You are becoming dangerous," said Timon to Annette. " They'll kidnap you to get the better of your virtue. I shall have to marry you to keep you safe."

" It would be the surest way to lose me. None of that, Timon ! "

" Oh ! I'm not keen on it !" he teased. " But you may expect them to stick at nothing to suppress you. If we were

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in Chicago (we shall be there in ten years), it would already be done."

She did not tell him that if it were not done, it was by a narrow shave. She had recently received a box of dates from San Francisco. Sender unknown. They were such beauties that she would have made her lunch of them. But a misgiving. . . . She took the fruit to the analytical laboratory of a bacteriologist, a Polish woman, who wrote articles for Timon's paper. The analysis revealed an instillation of daturine. Annette had thrown the box away without mentioning the matter to Timon. She had also received a box of caviare from Turkey, which she did not take the trouble to verify. Then nothing further was sent. The hunt was up. Annette was on the watch to see from what quarter danger might arise. Timon also kept watch without telling her. Neither of them thought it of any use to alarm the other. But their senses were on the alert, and the mutual danger, the secret duty, which they had taken upon themselves of safeguarding each other, drew them together.

One evening when they had been out together in the car, on leaving the inn in the Vosges where they had supped, Timon's chauffeur, a trusted servant who had been with him for years, was suddenly taken violently ill. Needless to inquire into the cause ; the only thing to be done was to leave him in the doctor's hands. And as Timon had to get back to Paris that night at all costs, another chauffeur appeared at a given point, to replace him. But Timon having scrutinized him, was suspicious, and refused him, and setting about a close examination of the car, he found that an essential screw was missing. At a price which defied any inclination to refuse, he procured the only motor car in the village, and unexpectedly returned with Annette by another route. After this, Timon trusted no one but Annette to drive on his secret expeditions. He taught her how to manage the car, and even, to a small extent, the aeroplane, so that she could take his place in case of need.

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His plebeian fury was rekindled by the accumulated danger that threatened him. He replied by attacking. He undermined his adversaries. With savage joy he exposed the political and financial schemes of the Royal Oiler, as he called (by the mildest name, for he used other epithets) Sir Henry of Batavia. Thus he found himself daily more deeply engaged in the battle against the whole clan of the anti-Soviet coalition. Undeniably he detested Communism ; but he hated and despised his enemies. He had no choice now. A fight to the death was being waged. He felt himself surrounded by their spies and police agents, and he employed against them his own, who were sometimes the same. Politics and business in these last fifteen years have become so mixed up with the police of States or private individuals that all these animals end by becoming one body. In the amalgam, one does not know the catchers from the caught. More often than not mutual blackmailing neutralizes them : which is a piece of luck ! Do we not see in our own countries prefects of police, of different factions, holding their post, against every wind, by means of the secret dossiers which they keep, indiscriminately against politicians of all parties, and the hanged, in their turn, holding the master-blackmailer by the noose of the hangman's rope ? Thus the most extraordinary secret compacts are made between enemies. But these compacts no longer existed for Timon. He had torn up the "scraps of paper". He had put himself outside the law, even the law of the jungle. The British Trust, which backed his newspaper, dropped it. Timon immediately passed it over to the enemy's camp, the great American Trust, which took it up ; and he undermined his allies of yesterday. But the fight was murderous. His new allies only used him for their own ends. He was in danger of being crushed between the two. The pavement of Paris was no longer safe for him. He started a new enterprise, a vast exchange of industries, which was to be turned against the Anglo-Saxon business hegemony, and necessitated his going abroad.

Those were months of intense labour, with which Annette

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was closely associated. She had no time to notice the perditions attacks which were beginning to be slyly aimed at her by the Press. Timon, more anxious than herself on her behalf, cursed and swore, and he had his own ways of keeping the brigands within bounds. But Annette had no reason to prefer Timon's to those of the enemy. . . . "Capuletti! Montecchi!" The same bandits! "Do me the favour, Timon, of sparing me the protection of your *bravi!*"

"Would you rather be defamed?"

"Oh! let them talk!"

She shrugged her shoulders. What did she care about opinion? . . . Yes, on one point she was sensitive. She had her heel of Achilles. It was what her boy might think of her. And through him the opinion she despised recovered its advantage. For Marc might get wind of it. She had to be very careful to furnish no foundation for suspicion that she derived any equivocal advantage from her work with Timon. And as it was unbearable to her to cheat Marc, she denied herself, even though Marc would know nothing about it—he never came to see her—all the presents that Timon offered her, which on her own account she would have found it just and natural to accept. . . . And why on earth not? Were they not amply repaid by her work, and all the risks she ran? Must it be confessed that she regretted above all the toilettes which she had once or twice refused. Who was there to be pleased at her refusal? If she alone had been concerned she would have let the world talk. But when for once, just once, she had accepted a simple, pretty, well-cut dress, which tempted her, she had the ill-luck to meet Marc. And what a look he had given her as his eyes swept her from head to foot! It had made her blush all over. She had hurried home to tear off the fatal dress, and she had hung it up in her wardrobe, never to take it out again. (She sometimes opened the wardrobe to peep at it with tenderness and vexation.) . . . But the harm was done. The jealous son did not forget. She formally forbade Timon to give her any more presents. She condemned

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herself to continue in her modest way of life, and her shabby apartment. She could too well imagine Marc, if he came, inspecting everything with the eye of an inquisitor. Timon, to whom she made no secret of the reasons for an "abstinence" which did not suit her tastes (she would have enjoyed a little comfort ; a backbone of fifty appreciates it better than young loins). Timon mockingly exclaimed :

" But, hang it all ! You wouldn't make such a fuss about cuckolding a husband ! "

She replied in the same strain :

" Of course not. That's understood. A husband takes what is given him. What God gives He can take away. But what God Himself cannot do is to detach Himself from His son. His son is the issue of His house ; and His house belongs to His son. He owes him an account of it. And I owe an account of mine. A husband is only a tenant. The proprietor of my house is my son."

" For all he does with it ! . . . I am the steward, I make it profitable."

Annette looked him up and down.

" I am not a house which is a source of revenue. . . . Do not trouble yourself about my house ! I have the key, and I will keep it. . . . Thank you, old Timon, but let us busy ourselves about your house ! You pay me to look after it. Don't let us waste our time talking nonsense ! "

Timon said to her, after days, and sometimes nights, of unremitting work, when he forced her to take a brief holiday

" You'll end by making me esteem humanity."

Annette replied :

" It is not esteem that it needs. It is air and bread. Try not to crush it too much ! You are so heavy, so heavy, Timon. People cannot breathe. What do you want with so much land ? A hole is enough, in the cemetery."

XXV

Timon had decided to establish his headquarters in Brussels, from whence he would have to make frequent journeys to Germany, London, and elsewhere. Annette had consented, not without hesitation, to accompany him. He had cast aside all pride in begging her to go with him. In bad hours—perhaps they were the good ones—she had already seen him possessed by a dark longing to smash everything, to bring the house down upon himself, and crush all these other men with him. Weariness and disgust weighed upon him. There were certain personal disasters which he never mentioned. A woman had killed herself, a beautiful Parisian actress, in full flower, whom he had gone mad over. He had insisted on buying her and carrying her off for a cruise on his yacht, and she, finding her master's yoke too heavy, had drowned herself one day to escape it . . . the implacable man had been shaken to his base. He who had passed through so much ruin, caused by him without a shadow of remorse, was inexplicably struck to the heart by this. Perhaps this was because the shock had come in an hour of weakness. Perhaps because he had been deeply affected by this passion, which he had treated as an adventure, without consideration, only realizing its unique value after he had laid it waste. He had confided it to Annette alone, and other confidences had followed, which had shown the hearer, the most pitiful, the best, the human side, hidden in the cyclops. By hearing his confessions she had incurred obligations towards him. Rights also. He recognized them implicitly. It was prudent not to abuse them. She took care not to do so. But she used her influence, with precaution, to direct Timon's activity in the social direction which she thought right. Subtle as was the pressure of her hand, it never escaped Timon, but it pleased him to let her have her way : it was not contrary to his most secret instincts : he only needed sufficient conviction to move his will : it did not

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displease him that Annette was convinced : he found it rather refreshing to the burning aridity of his will working without a definite goal : he could very well give her the satisfaction of behaving as if he believed in it.

And little by little he became engrossed in the game. In the capitalist fortress he became like the army that goes over to the enemy—the barbarian incorporated in the Roman legions, who is ready to open the gates to the invasion. He now quite openly opposed the imperialist coalition which, in default of the ruined intervention, was trying to crush the U.S.S.R., by economic blockade. He forced them to raise it by concluding business treaties with Russia, not, however, merely to favour the latter : he derived great profits from them. And his exasperated rivals, not wishing to let him reap the sole benefit, were forced, in their turn, to solicit agreements with the proletariat world they longed to crush. Their defections made a breach in the coalition. Hate upon hate accumulated against Timon. They wanted to break him. He knew it. This was no moment, when he was about to throw himself into the furnace and organize his war machine, his Steel Exchange, destined to break the omnipotent Anglo-Saxon machine, for Annette to forsake him. She was the only intimate associate whom he could trust.

She had some trouble in making up her mind. She did not wish to be separated from her son. Though the moral separation apparently still persisted between them, they had had time for reflection, and even to say their *mea culpa*. Annette was ready to spare Marc from making the first advance. But since the affair of the dress the suspicious fool had been sulking in his tent. Were they to be parted with this stupid misunderstanding ? Time was passing. Life was passing. And we pass away for ever. . . . One morning she wrote to him :

" My Dear Boy,—I am leaving Paris for a few months. I shall not be far off this time. No further than we have been for a year. But I can no longer go or stay without embracing you.

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Won't you bring me your face? If you think that you have anything to forgive me for—I think you are mistaken, but I do not care about being in the right—can't you forgive me? Whether you forgive or not, come and kiss me!"

He had not yet received this note, when chance brought them together. Passing in front of the church of St. Eustache, Marc saw that they were giving *The Beatitudes*, by Cesar Franck there. He was longing for music. It was the thirst of a parched soul. There was a struggling crowd at the entrance to the cheapest seats in the apse. Marc slipped in among them, and, taking advantage of the confusion, got in without paying. He heard calls from behind and pushed further into the crowd; others like himself had broken through the dyke; he was forgotten. With hundreds of others, he plunged into the lake of music, melancholy, pure, childlike, and very wise, like the eyes of an old man. And the sunless light of a day drawing to its close floated, like the feet of the Christ walking on the waters. He was not well acquainted with the music, it was far already from the youth of to-day; but Marc's heart was sincere enough, and his sense of art sure enough, to make him feel all the more keenly the beauty of a soul different from his own, and his poignant lack of the hopes, even of the sufferings which sustained that bygone age, aureoled, like its God with the crown of thorns. And he thought, not without envy—Oh! happy sorrow, which carries with it its promised joy. . . . The choir sang:

"Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. . . ."

And suddenly, in spite of himself, he began to cry. He turned his face to the pillar against which he was leaning, covering his eyes with his hand. If anyone saw him, no one thought of smiling at it; but it vexed his pride; he sniffed, with a grimace, and wiped away the shameful tears with his fingers. . . . And at that moment, as he raised his head, his eyes cleared by the rain, he saw on the other side of the pillar, within a few steps of him, the same dew, the same tears,

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running down the sorrowful face of his mother. . . . She was there. She had not seen him. . . . He drew back, and from the shelter of his pillar he spied upon her, he scrutinized her: catching in his net every emotion as it arose.

The music woke very different echoes in Annette's heart than in Marc's. It was herself, it was her life of other days that rose from the dead. Every enduring work is made of the very substance of its times, the artist does not build it alone; in it is inscribed all the sufferings, loves, dreams of his companions, the whole company. Annette, too, had given her blood for the making of this music. She saw herself in it as in a portrait which one compares with the older face, disappointed by the years that followed after. She heard in that music the cry of man despairing of justice and the voice of the Judge who consoles. She remembered that she had heard it long ago in German Strasbourg, nine years before the War. And the Germans of those days in all the full-blown pride of triumph, did not understand the meaning of this poem of oppressed justice. Annette, lost among the crowd of great blonde bodies, gorged with joy and victory, had thought :

"We, your vanquished, we hear and understand these holy words; and by that fact we, your conquered, are your conquerors—we have the better part. . . ."

And now the situation was reversed. The nation that suffered injustice—Annette's nation—had become the nation that caused injustice to be suffered. And the Beatitudes' song of despair and consolation was no longer addressed to them. The Christ of defeat had passed to the other side. Alas! men have a sense of justice only inasmuch as it agrees with their own interests. Annette had grown up in a generation nourished by the generous "*Gloria Victis!*" And she saw with anguish that her nation, now victorious, had gone back, without formulating it, in the depths of its hard selfishness, to the word of the Gallic Brennus. And the invisible wheel of destiny turned and turned, and would bring back the dark days. . . . Annette was pierced through by the seven swords of memory.

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denial, shame, remorse, cruel irony, terror of the expiation she saw approaching, and a resigned renunciation of life. And her son concealed behind the pillar caught each thought of hers in its flight ; he drank them in, he espoused her ; and he felt exactly, being hers, how it was with her, he was sure of it, experiencing at the same moment the same bitterness, and he knew why that tear fell : for in his own eyes the same tear was held back. And suddenly a warm impulse drew him towards her. He pushed through the crowd, and coming up behind her he took his mother's hand. She started, turned her head, and saw over her shoulder, almost resting his chin upon it, the head of her boy ; she embraced him with grateful eyes ; they exchanged their customary fraternal glance ; and hand in hand they listened, without moving, until the end of the oratorio.

When they came out of the church, and not till then, their hands were loosed. But their hearts were not loosed. There was never a word of explanation about the past, nor of reproaches, nor forgiveness ; both had wiped the slate clean. They spoke only of what they had just felt together, of the bitterness of victory. . . . Ah ! if the vanquished Germans but knew it, knew that a gagged France is outraged by the injustice, hypocrisy, and rapacity of the politicians who make edicts in her name ! But it is the same with all nations. And hardly any of the post-War peoples have the strength to react. They are like quicksands in which goodwills are swallowed up. Marc said :

" We sink further with every step. We are caught in it from below."

Annette, with her hand on his shoulder, made answer :
" Let us escape from above ! If our legs are caught, let us free ourselves by the head and breast ! To free oneself is the work of life. It will only be completed by death. But as the majority are the living dead, who let themselves be sucked alive into the pit, let us tear ourselves away from the leeches of the marshes ! " (And she thought of those of Rumania.)

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" Do as I do ! Never grow weary ! And help those who are sinking to get out ! "

Marc felt the mud of the marshes sticking to his armpits. If they had not been in the streets, he would have thrown his arms round Annette's neck like a child. He was comforted by her presence. He looked at her with love, he was proud of her words. How could he ever have suspected her ? He took her arm and leant upon it ; he was not ashamed—it was good !—to lean with all his weight upon her.

And it was at this moment that Annette told him that she was leaving Paris again for some time. He felt a piercing regret when he heard it, a childish fear. She felt a tremor of it. She said :

" You need me ? Do you want me to stay ? "

But his pride had immediately recovered itself. He said :

" I can be alone. You had to be ! "

He thought of the long struggles of the past, when his mother was fighting her way in Paris. She smiled :

" I was not alone : for I carried you in my arms."

He smiled in his turn, and said :

" I hope that some day I will repay you for it."

PART THE THIRD
THE WIND OF CRIME

XXVI

N those days Sylvie bethought herself of her nephew once more. Her fury for business and pleasure was over and gone, like a gust of wind, as it had arisen. Serious breaches in her health and fortune had roughly reminded her that it was time to settle down to a quiet life . . . “*It boots not to run. One must know . . .*” how to stop in time! . . . Too much rich food. Too much good wine. Bloodshot eyes. Sudden fits of mad anger or of wild laughter. . . . After one of these, at a supper, she was very near apoplexy. She realized it, she saw herself clearly and without flattery; even in the midst of her fits, when she had lost control . . . she said to herself:

“ You’re raving! Pull yourself together! . . . ”

But the brake refused to act. The arteries of neck and temples were throbbing, and she began to wander. . . . Halt! . . . She made up her mind in one night, shut up shop, sold her hotel, and realized her fortune. Her fool of a Guy Coquille had burst like a rotten egg, in the failure of a bank and States: for those were the days when perfumers, wishing in their vanity, to play a part in polities, maintained governments, like prostitutes, which, however, dishonoured their own signature, and swindled them, without shame, after pocketing the cash. Serve him right! That did not disturb Sylvie’s sleep. . . . But her sleep was disturbed; the whole machine needed a rest, to be taken to pieces and oiled. She purged herself, used mustard plasters, and got leeches to suck the excess of blood. And she took to living a bourgeois family life.

She had a family, which she had taken, ready hatched, and had now legally adopted. Three children between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. The mother, Perpétue Passereau—she had adorned her Belleville-born mug with the pomegranate flower—over-the-ear name: Carmen, which suited her as a

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straw hat would a donkey—had been one of Sylvie's old comrades in work and adventure. She reminded her of her first campaigns, her hard early days in Paris. Twenty-five years of fidelity. She did not forget her old dogs, even when it was a dog with a hat on, a bit crazy, clumsy, and blundering, that she was perpetually beating, like the tiresome Perpétue, who licked her cheek, and bore her no grudge. She had made a foolish marriage, from which God had delivered her, but without delivering her from her extravagance. The husband, unfaithful, and a drunkard, had disappeared in the War. Carmen made haste to replace him. Without Sylvie's perilous equilibrium, she copied her caprices and followed her ruinous example. She had been the prey of lovers, and allowed herself to be prostituted and despoiled by a gambler, who finally induced her (without forcing her to it, the acme of art) to sell herself to others to keep him. Yet she was a good, hard-working woman, though she could not refrain from the intoxication of pleasure. In the worst hours she never lost her good-humoured fatalism, and finally, when her time came, she made an edifying end in the arms of a good, very human priest—though she could not sincerely regret her sins: she told him so, in all frankness, and he pretended not to hear very well; and for her own part, docilely, under his dictation, she brayed out her *mea culpa*, "just to please him", so she said. She watched herself die, unmoved, though she shed a tear at the thought of her children; but she was quite tranquillized at the thought of leaving them to Sylvie; and she talked to her almost to the last moment of the good life (despite its scurvy tricks), good work, and lovers.

The three children, endowed by her with the dulcet names of Bernadette, Colombe, and Ange, had all reacted according to their rhythms, against the example of that life of small happiness and small sorrows, offered unveiled to their precocious experience. The two younger ones were twins, Ange and Colombe; they were between thirteen and fourteen at the time of their mother's death. Bernadette was sixteen. The

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boy was good, diligent, and possessed the family spirit, he showed pious and mystic aspirations, which the priests did not fail to capture : he intended to become a priest at an early age. He exercised an influence over his twin, a brunette with the beautiful eyes of a young ass, tenderly silly and sensual. The two kept together apart. They loved each other in God. It was really God whom the pious Ange loved in Colombe. But Colombe had already the naïve instinct, which possessed her all her life, in order to love God, to love the boy ; that is, His image. The eldest looked on at this chaste, greedy, and very innocent oarystis, with ironical indifference. Her soul did not hunt in couples. She had a life to herself, and for herself. She did not share it with others. Scarcely with herself. She was not eager to know herself too well. And no one on earth would ever know her. She was "repressed" by contact in adolescence, with the circles of Paris, driven mad by the orgiastic reaction of the years 1919-20. She had seen those mad birds burning themselves in the fire, and her instinct had guarded her against the fire. She did not condemn them morally. Morality had a very small place in her thoughts. The question for her was one of order, reason, cleanliness—especially outward cleanliness ; body and house, the deportment of life. She had suffered too much from the "*Go where I push you !*" of her mother's life. That was why, with no true religion of the heart, she accepted the exterior armour of religion. She saw in it a restraining force, necessary for avoiding such disastrous experiences as those of her mother. Never to think beyond what it is prudent to let into one's life : that was to her an instinctive rule of private salvation. It in no wise detracted (quite the contrary) from her cold, sharp sense of the real, which was narrow, crude, and tidy, as is that of a little bourgeoisie of the Maine district. Neither had it any hold on her passionnal life, the keys of which she kept to herself. She kept her purse-strings knotted, and held them in her dry hand. She was not incapable of even ardent affection, but she applied her energy and interest, even with those nearest to her,

only to that zone of their life which seemed parallel with hers. She cared little for what lay beyond—the mystical games of the two younger ones, Sylvie's bewildering caprices, or Marc's intellectual life, which Sylvie (we will come to it later) dangled before her at the end of a line. She had no wish to argue about what they thought. She did not poke in her sharp little nose, curved like a vulture's, which if she liked, could have picked from the bottom of the pot at the first try. But to every man his own pot ! She was too taken up with skimming her own. However, she was too shrewd not to know that it is decent not to let other people see too clearly one's too exclusive interest in oneself. One must appear to be interested in what interests them. Even Sylvie was taken in—at least in what concerned herself ; as to the others, she was not sorry that her ward should pull their strings with such dexterity. (She did not like dupes, and she was one herself.) Bernadette, who had discovered her weak point, entertained her with her malicious observations, measuring their point according to Sylvie's secret dispositions, for or against people ; and for Sylvie herself she reserved her caresses, like a lean cat rubbing itself against the legs of the master who holds the plate. But the purring and the arched back were not altogether false. The lean cat loved the hand that held the plate. At sixteen Bernadette was inclined to make herself an ideal of the Sultana of the Thousand and One Nights, which Sylvie appeared to all the young needlewomen of Paris. If she was not of the stuff to imitate her in her pleasures and caprices, she felt herself quite able to pick up her money-bags, and she was grateful to her for having filled them for her profit. Sylvie made no secret of the fact that she intended to make her her chief heiress, in default of Annette and Marc, who persisted in refusing to take anything from her. And as she was nettled by it, she had undertaken to force Marc to accept her money-bags by tucking him up with them in Bernadette's bed. She intended to marry them off. She was silly enough (the most subtle are silly on that point) to let them both know it. The result on both was

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different. The cold Bernadette took fire like a vine pole. Marc turned from the vine in disdain. He might (who knows ?) have appreciated its muscatel grapes if he had been left to seek them for himself. But he was indignant that anyone should dispose of him without consulting him. It was enough to make the fox lift his leg against the vine. At once, he could see nothing in Bernadette, body and mind, but what irritated him.

Yet she was not lacking in charms. Her thinness was supple and well shaped, a little too dark, but tempting. (Thinness is, or may be, the mother of voluptuousness.) Above all, she had the Parisian art of turning her defects to good account. The least little bit of make-up, a simple dress of sure taste and perfect line. . . . It was not her least claim to Sylvie's esteem. She would have made a Tanagra—except for her shrike's head. But even the head, the little round, rough head, did not detract from the line ; it had style, and was in the style of the whole. Moreover, it was lit up—when she liked (it was only when Marc was looking at her) by two greenish-blue eyes, which grew tender and full of intelligence, and whose appeal was enough to wake the dead. But the effect on Marc was to make him kick against it—and all the more that, in spite of himself, it thrilled him ; angrily he tore out the dart.

Sylvie could not understand why her nephew refused the happiness she offered him : a fine and solid product of Paris : (she was a connoisseur !) Nothing shoddy ; made of good stuff, and made to last : the tunic would wear out the body rather than wear out itself—an honest girl, active, shrewd, endowed (over and above the inheritance) with keen, clear, practical intelligence—and who, moreover, brought the wicked monkey an intact virginity and a heart new to love, which burned for him alone . . . for that ape ! . . . For Bernadette had poured forth her effusions to her. And Sylvie, scolding her, but secretly delighted, had made her ashamed of burning for that bad boy, ugly, silly and proud, poor as Job, and as Job cantankerous. (She believed it, and loved him all

the more for it !) If she married him, she would be doing him an honour. . . . But it would not have done at all if Bernadette had taken her at her word and repeated it, as if off her own bat. Sylvie would have warmed her ears and told her that she was not fit to untie her nephew's shoes : she was deucedly proud of him ! She allowed no one but herself, who, when he was a youngster, had put on and taken off his first pants, to find fault with him. After making Bernadette ashamed of loving Marc too much, she made her ashamed of not knowing how to make him love her, a much sorer point. They plotted together how they could catch this innocent. Since it was for a good purpose, all means were lawful : even to make up one's mind like one's face. Sylvie instructed Bernadette how to catch the pikelet on the hook by interesting herself in his preoccupations, whether intellectual or social . . . (poor, crazy loon ! every man is, more or less ! . . .) Bernadette conscientiously set about putting these lessons into practice. But the effect of her fine efforts on Marc was that the situation, which was not good, became worse. One cannot manufacture a mind for oneself, like a body. The little bourgeois was not a fool within her natural limits ; when she went beyond them, she became strained, she recited, without full stops or commas : the shrike became a parakeet. Marc was not polite enough to hide his impressions. The mortified Bernadette did not linger on this advanced ground ; without telling her so, she sent Sylvie and her sermons to the right about, and retreated to her former position, and she was right. But in battle it is not enough to be right ; the thing to be is victorious. This she was not.

She tried, without any further attempt to serve mass for him, to offer Marc every facility to say mass for himself—any mass he liked ; she didn't care !—while she looked after, tidied and dusted the chapel. The pulpit and altar for him. The care of the holy water stoups for her. Would not this settle everything to perfection ? He would be free to say and think whatever he pleased. She would attend to material things. It was

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no small thing ! It was quite enough for her, if she could get the husband. She cared nothing for the rest.

The rest was all that Marc cared about. . . . With the girl in his arms, of course ! pretty or ugly, so long as she pleased him. Bernadette did not please him. And as to the material security she offered him, he cared nothing for it. Worse, he mistrusted it. For one like Marc, to have too complete security is to end before one has begun. He was in quest of what escaped him, of what he must, with danger, catch. The security of Bernadette was too cheaply won. Her paucity of intellectual needs made her close her garden before she was twenty, or, rather, her little back yard of a bourgeois house, without bothering about what was going on outside her district. Such were the little bourgeois of rue Cassette, who in the midst of the Commune never noticed the battles which were setting fire to other districts. Marc could sniff powder and smell blood from one end of the town to the other ! He could feel the whole universe of thought crumbling under his feet. He must live and flounder up to his chin in all the revolutions in the world, be present and help at the monstrous delivery. . . . Bernadette knew that upheavals were on foot ; every girl in Paris reads about them in the newspaper—after the gossip of Paris, current events, the serial story, fashion, sports, and advertisements—when she has time ! First you must do what you have to do, one does not live merely to amuse oneself ! “It’s all very well for men to waste hours arguing about what is going on in China, or among those robbers of our Russian funds, the Bolsheviks !” We have only to think of our work, our accounts, and of meals too, and of our bed in our clean tidy home, without bothering about the absurdities going on outside : they will go, as they came. . . . Theories seemed to her sheer nonsense. She was satisfied with the body of moral and social conventions put to the test, and cemented by the labour and thrift of solid generations of bourgeois ; religion had its place among them—a not exacting Catholic religion, with or without faith, but above all practical

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and punctual, which contributed to order and consolidated it. Bernadette differed in this from the sceptical Sylvie, who could never refrain from jeering at the "churchies", but who let her ward please herself, with indulgent mockery, muttering up her sleeve that bigotry, in small doses, in a woman was, "*on the whole*", one more pledge of domestic security for a husband.

Which, "*on the whole*", was not so sure as all that! . . . For Bernadette, apparently so moderate, without surprises, cold and sensible, for three weeks in a month, was strangely troubled in the other week. Her character changed; she did not judge or reason about people and things with the same eyes, or the same ears; she could no longer steer herself: beware of ditches and trees on the road! The machine seemed tempted to run its nose into them. . . . As these risks were chronic, Bernadette had learnt to be conscious of their approach; and she managed, when they came, to shut herself up apart as much as possible; she had developed an extreme power of restraint, to dissemble them. But in her secret self, and in those hours, hate and love, desire, envy and jealousy, all the urges arising from womb or brain, the worst imaginings of an unbridled and unsatisfied temperament, prowled and lay in wait. She was ever within two inches of the most inconceivable inventions. But all this stress was only perceptible in the red flushes that rose suddenly to her neck, or ebbed away, leaving a greenish pallor in her cheeks. She tore her mouth with the bit, she felt herself on the verge of fainting, and she stopped herself just in time. It was in the main, all risks and pains allowed for, a voluptuous pleasure. She savoured it alone.

Marc was far from suspecting it. And—who knows? if he had been aware of it, he might, perhaps, have begun to take an interest in her. He was one of those men who, foolishly, are instinctively attracted by the dangerous, the obscure, the dim gulf; for the warm night promises riches, which the dull day calls in; and they fear nothing so much in life as uniformity. In this he was, to his misfortune, indeed Annette's son! . . .

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(She had had to suffer for it more than once ; and her worst remorse was that her son should suffer from it, for her. . . .) Even if Marc could have seen in the depths of Bernadette, the shapeless reptilian life that stirred the mud at the bottom of the pond (it stirs in the depths of nearly every one of us), he would have honoured it with more attention than he honoured the surface of the pond, the cold life of the monotonous little bourgeois.

Sylvie, less wise than Bernadette, who begged her not to interfere, preached to her nephew, in vain, the advantage of a wife who would administer her strictly domestic domain with wise economy, leaving him all the freer outside. But that family ideal of the "proprietor" who takes his income and his wife in coupons, leaving the title-deeds shut up in his bank, is out of fashion in our epoch, when people will not shut themselves up at home, but must be perpetually on the move—the age of the "Wanderer" has come back. Can the wife be to the "Traveller" a travelling companion to share his perpetual instability, the daily insecurity of body and mind ? That was the question. If it had been put to Bernadette, she would have answered, with a sigh at renouncing the home, but firmly, since she loved him !

"Yes, I want to. So I can."

And she would have been able to, at least for a time. She was brave. She would have faced all dangers, for the thing she wanted, for the thing she loved. But however sincere the "Yes !", the body alone would have followed it, not the mind. She would have promised more than she could perform. She would have tried in vain : she would have been lost outside her home ; and her reaction would have been fatal ; (it was her right). It would have been a stone tied to the man's heel, holding him back. In the end, the woman's terrible force of inertia would have got the better of the impulse of the male, dragging his cannon ball after him in his climb.

Marc's instinct was wiser than Sylvie's plans to make him happy against his will. But Sylvie also would not have been

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sorry to tie his legs to prevent him from breaking his neck. Between the two women, the *Marechale* and the conscript, there was an unspoken secret understanding on the subject. And Marc's mistrustful nose had smelt it out. It was more than enough to make him take a violent dislike to Bernadette. The louder Sylvie sang her praises, the more Marc abused her. It went so far on both sides that Sylvie, after giving him his final choice, in one of her apoplectic rages, red to bursting point with fury, slammed her door in Marc's face.

"Go to the devil, beggar! And stew in your beggary!"

The young beggar did not fail to do so.

And Bernadette was left, like Cinderella sitting in the embers, with a cold face, heroically brooding on the fire and rancour under her skirt.

XXVII

One day when Marc had only a few francs in his pocket for food, he went into a café to spend them on drink. (Oh! not to excess! He had not the means to be unreasonable. . . . But when, like this morning, he felt tired, sick, and without appetite, he had not the courage to swallow inferior meat, badly served, which disgusted him; he preferred a cup of black coffee and a glass of brandy which stimulated him, to the detriment of his stomach.) He added to it that other stimulant—newspaper reading. On the front page of a daily paper, his eyes fell upon a sensationnally disfigured portrait; but he recognized at the first glance the low deeply furrowed forehead projecting over the eyes, the mouth like a gorilla in a rage. . . . Simon . . . Simon Bouchard. . . . It was indeed he! Above his head stood the conspicuous headline:

"MURDER IN AN EXPRESS TRAIN—CRIMINAL ARRESTED."

Marc upset his little glass of brandy. He read without

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understanding. He re-read, forcing himself to grasp every word. The facts left no room for doubt. In the express from Paris to Vintimille, between Dijou and Mâcon, a traveller had been strangled in his bed during the night. The murderer, surprised as he was leaving the compartment, had jumped off the train in motion and rolled on to the ballast, where he had been picked up, with an injured face and broken thigh bone. The victim was well known in Paris, a financier and a member of many Companies of Directors. The assassin was an unbalanced intellectual, an anarchist, a communist. . . . The bourgeois Press has never succeeded in distinguishing between the two. . . . (It pretends to be stupider than it is! to confuse them is to its own interest.) Of course "the hand of Moscow was at the bottom of it. . . ."

Marc went out, much upset, leaving his cup of coffee half drunk. He did not know what he was about. On the boulevard he kept repeating : "Simon! . . . Simon! . . ." without seeing the passers-by, whom with the instinct of a somnambulist, he brushed past, without knocking against them as he went. He recalled, confusedly, the days spent with Bouchard, and by an unconscious system of defence, as if he was before the tribunal, it was the early days he remembered best, when Bouchard had just come up from the provinces, not yet licked into shape, incorruptible, intact, and hard as flint. Marc had felt in him the genuineness of an entire cart-horse, with no deception about anything, neither the solidity of his shoulders, his hoofs, nor his pasterns. Beside him Marc felt himself ill defended, vulnerable, delivered over to all the germs of putrefaction which infest great cities ! If the witches in *Macbeth* had said to them : "One of you will be beheaded on the scaffold," Marc would have raised his nervous hands to his neck in terror. He was so sure of the other, and so uncertain of himself. What had they done to him ? Who are "they" ? Everybody ! All these dreadful post-War people. And ourselves first of all. . . .

His glance met the bulging eyes of Véron—Coquard,

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watching his approach from the terrace of a café. He was sniggering. Marc passed through the row of tables, and without sitting down, said in a smothered voice :

" Véron, you know ? "

Véron did not stop sniggering. He said :

" I know. The idiot has got himself nabbed. I quite expected it ! They'll bleed him. . . ."

Marc saw red. Simon's blood spurted into his eyes. He fell upon Véron and, seizing him by his thick neck pressed him against the wall of the café, crying :

" Assassin ! . . . It's you, you who have killed him ! . . ."

Véron—Coquard freed himself in a fury ; he thumped Marc's thin chest with his great fists ; he flung him against a table, where Marc sat down in the saucers and the overturned beer ; in the hubbub of protests the intruder was ejected in a trice. From the pavement, where a crowd was gathering, Marc could see Véron, with glaring eyes, shaking his fist and bawling :

" Don't try it on again, you swine, or I'll turn you over to the police ! . . ."

Two policemen were crossing the boulevard. Marc, his legs shaking with anger, glared at Véron, over the human hedge that separated them and said :

" Copper ! You are in with them then ? That puts the lid on ! "

Véron howled, upsetting everything to fall upon him. Marc waited with folded arms. But a woman's hand slipped through his arm. A prostitute who knew him dragged him away, saying :

" You're mad, my boy ; don't stay here ! I don't want them to smash you up ! "

She did not let go of him until they had turned the corner of the street. He did not hear a word she said. Only two streets further on did he see, in memory, the tired puffy eyelids, the blood-red make-up on the wide mouth which smiled a fraternal good-bye at him. He thought :

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"If that good Samaritan had met Simon, he might have been saved."

He tried in vain to remember her name. But the fiery flood of the tragedy drove it and her image back into everlasting shadow. He kept on repeating to himself : "Simon—Simon. . . ." And at the thought of Véron's snigger rage rose in his heart again. He said to himself :

"That rascal led him astray. He put alcohol into his stomach, and the rage for money and women, like the flaming torches tied to the foxes in the Bible, and he let him loose in the corn, mad with torture. And the scoundrel rubs his hands at the penalty and the conflagration. . . ."

And in his own long hands he also felt the itch of the assassin. But he saw that people were looking at him ; he controlled himself with a violent effort, digging his nails into his palms, and suddenly calm again, he considered what was best to be done.

They could not let Bouchard sink without trying to help him ! He must summon the comrades. . . . The comrades ! Where were they ? Were there any left ? . . . Jean Casimir was in Prague, second attaché of the Embassy, Adolphe Chevalier was private secretary of a Minister, always travelling and attending banquets ! . . . A lot they cared for Bouchard ! . . . He must force them to. But where could lie get hold of them ? It was no use thinking of Jean Casimir ! Marc scribbled a letter-card to him in a post office, an incoherent and imperious note, more likely to offend him. After throwing it into the box, he would have liked to recover it. Too late ! . . . Early or late, one could not count upon him. . . . Jean Casimir would not waste an evening for a man overboard. Marc set about hunting up Chevalier. However little sympathy Chevalier had ever had with Bouchard, he professed at least, on principle, the sense of comradeship ; perhaps he would think it in his own interest, as comrade, to hush up the scandal of the affair as much as he could ; and through his ministers' wives, he had long arms. . . . Marc

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" Well, old chap ? What have you got to say to me ? "

But at the first words, he said, " Excuse me ! " and hurried off to shake hands with a passing barrister. Chevalier was in no hurry to come back. Marc waited. Chevalier knew that the creature would wait till night. He came back and stopped Marc as he was about to continue his request. He made a grand, pathetic gesture which meant, " What a misfortune ! " and said quite as clearly, " What a nuisance ! "

" Yes, yes," he said ; " it's heartbreaking ! . . . But what can we do about it ? . . . It is for the law to speak now."

He raised his chin solemnly, smiled to right and left, then stammered :

" I am in a hurry. . . . Excuse me. . . . Otherwise, what about your health ? . . . I'll send you word some morning to come to lunch. . . . Good-bye, old chap ! "

And he made off.

Marc stood planted there. There was nothing to answer. Every animal is true to its nature. The dog is a dog. The cat is a cat. The wolf a wolf. I am a wolf. What am I doing here ? . . .

He went home. . . . But he could not shut himself up alone, with that weight on his chest. Tired as he was, he sought pretexts for putting off the moment of going upstairs to his room. He seized upon the thought of Ruche. It was some time since he had ceased to see her. There was a coldness between them. It was curious that this coolness had begun

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from the very morning of that night when Ruche had succoured him—when from one bed to the other they had held hands. They avoided each other. If they met, Ruche pretended not to see him, or her smile was hostile. Marc did not understand it, but he did not care to find out the reason.

But in this hour he needed a woman, a friend, into whose heart (though hostile) he could unburden himself of what oppressed him. ✓A woman is always a woman, a mother, a sister : however cold her head, her body is warm, and it thrills to all the passions of man ; it compassionates ; one can rest one's forehead on it when it is too heavy to carry. She is the nest. ✓

He went up to the entresol of the street crescent, under the mass of Val de Grace. He knocked.

"Come in ! "

It was late. The room was already in the dusk. At the far end Ruche was lying stretched out in her nook, her legs were bare, her long greyhound legs, uncovered by her short, tucked up skirt, one hung down the steps of the alcove. She made no movement to cover it. She watched indifferently as Marc came slowly forward. And he, as his straining eyes became gradually accustomed to the dusk, even before he saw, had perceived by the crackling and the smell, that she was going to smoke opium. He did not waste time arguing about that. He had first to get rid of his burden. He spoke, spoke before she had questioned him. He told her all, Simon, Véron, Chevalier, all his agitation of the day, his furies, his sorrow, and his horror. He did not expect advice from her—yet, who knew ? As a solicitor's daughter, she might see clearer than he could, how things might go—but a simple word, a cry of pity—or less still : her outstretched hand, pressing the hand seeking support in the darkness and saying : " My boy ! . . . "

She said nothing, she did nothing, she listened, she waited. He waited. Nothing came. He could see her now, quite clearly, lying full length on her back, her head lower than her

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body, one arm and one leg hanging down, motionless, immodest, indifferent, staring coldly at him. And in that look he read what he had always suspected. . . . But he had always refused to believe it, especially in the face of such a tragic climax—a woman's antipathy towards Bouchard, dumb, profound, implacable, beyond appeal.

He choked. . . . The thin lips, marked with a red furrow, of the recumbent woman, parted coldly to say :

" Will you have a pipe ? . . . No ? . . . Well then, go away ! "

He went without a word. He heard the wood of the parquet creaking under her bare feet, behind him, and close on his back, the sound of the key in the keyhole, as she double locked the door.

XXVIII

When he got home and thought over the events of the day, he could not tell which of the three he hated most : Véron, Chevalier, or Ruche. . . . It was only later, very late into the night, that Ruche's face, which he kept on visualizing, in order to detest her the more, appeared to him ravaged. When he was there, facing her, he had seen nothing but the hardness of her eyes, the gnawing hatred. He saw her features now. She was gnawed too. . . . So much the worse ! So much the better !

He passed the following days under the weight of the perpetual obsession. He forced himself to work ; he was obliged to ! He was busy with his work ; but he made a division in his mind : all the work was done mechanically ; all the thought was sucked in by the one idea. There was nothing he could do. His only relief was to write to his mother. She could give him no advice. But they shared their miseries. It was a compact tacitly concluded between them. Marc had felt a surge of pride and gratitude in his heart when Annette had

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been the first to write things to him which a mother does not usually confide to her son—things said straight out, the raw facts of her life and her struggles, as from friend to friend. He did not tell her of his emotion. But he had contributed his share ever since by an assault of confidences to her. On his side the confidences went very far ; and Annette was sometimes taken aback ; but she too kept silence on this point. She understood that it was not impudence, but a proof of allegiance : he gave himself up, with all his shames, bound hand and foot. And one could not suspect any kind of unwholesome moral display in the style of Jean Jacques. One could imagine him blushing and saying to himself : “She will despise me this time. . . . So much the worse ! I must . . .” They were sure of it now: nothing of themselves which one confessed to the other, would that other repudiate. “Mine is thine. Thine is mine. . . .” In the chaos of these days, such communion of blood is a great good fortune. Marc and Annette owed their salvation to it on more than one occasion. When, with weariness and disgust, the blood flows back to the heart, the regular rhythm of the contracting valves sends it back to the arteries. It is not even necessary that the answer should have arrived. The call is sufficient to make one feel the systole. After writing Marc was relieved for one night.

And six days later, he had the surprise of seeing Jean Casimir walk in, the last person he expected ! He stammered :

“ You received it ? . . .”

“ I received your letter,” said Jean Casimir. “ I ought to have seen the affair in the papers. But you did well to write to me. It had escaped my notice.”

“ And where have you come from ? ”

“ From Prague, of course. I came by air to Strasburg. I have been here three days now. I have not been to see you sooner because I attended to what was most urgent first. You’re not cross about it ? ”

“ Jean Casimir ! ”

Marc embraced him.

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"I don't think I've wasted my time," the other went on.
"But I must tell you at once that I am afraid we can do nothing."

"We must do everything that we possibly can."

"That's what I think. But what we can possibly do doesn't go far. You know already what to expect from our friends."

"Who told you?"

"I've been round to all of them. I found your tracks on their doorsteps."

Marc burst into curses against them. Jean Casimir said:

"They are what they are. Do you still cherish illusions?"

"I have none. And I persist in hoping that I wrong mankind. But they are even worse than I thought. And the women are the worst of all."

A few brutal and disheartened words showed how he was haunted by the dreadful hatred he had seen and touched in Ruche's silence. Jean Casimir said:

"Yes, but she may have her reasons for hatred."

Marc was surprised.

"What! What reasons? Against Simon?"

"Against Simon, or another, you or me! No matter whom! She hates someone, or all men. . . . Did you look at her carefully? That she has her reasons is writ large."

Marc was struck by the perspicacity of this man who passed over everything without a pause. Instantly he recalled Ruche's ravaged face, he looked deep into it, and said to himself: "It's true!" He asked:

"But what do you think?"

With a movement of his lips, Jean Casimir dismissed the subject:

"I don't think anything. I have no time to think about it. Everyone is caught in the trap some day. She has left some of her feathers here or there. It's her own business. She'll get out of it with or without feathers. Women always get out of it. Let's think of ourselves, of our affair! . . ."

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" You've grown hard on them," said Marc. " You were supposed to be on their side once."

" That's why. We've rolled over together. I know them. They have cheated me. I have cheated some of them. We always get on our legs again. . . . Let us think rather of that fool who has managed to break his while waiting to have his neck broken ! . . . If I am a woman, as you say, then it is quite in order that I should take an interest in idiots of men like you and him. . . . Don't protest ! You are like him—of a finer race—but just as headstrong, just as narrow in all that you undertake. When you fall into the trap, it's not your feathers that you leave there ; it's the whole body. You make me pity you ! One has a bit of contempt for you ; but perhaps that is why one loves you. . . ."

Marc would willingly have slapped his face. At the back of his throat he murmured : " That prostitute ! . . ." And then he swallowed hard : " *She* is right. . . ." And remembering that "*she*" or "*he*" Jean Casimir had not hesitated for a moment to come back from Prague to succour a fallen friend, he quenched the look of fury he was hurling at the equivocal smile of the roguish boy, and said :

" That's enough talk ! Let's come to facts."

" The fact is," said Jean Casimir calmly, " that I have seen Simon. . . . Yes, I succeeded, not without knocking at various doors—it is not the highest that open easiest—in getting the prison door opened half-way for me, or rather the door of the infirmary, where they are busy sticking him together again, so that he may be complete for the great day. I tried to talk to him. But at the first word he smothered me with curses. Only one eye and his mouth were visible under his bandages : a small, hard, rhinoceros eye, sunk under the horn of the eyelid. But the eye saw at once, and the rhinoceros reared ! He trampled on everything, me, you, Véron, all his friends. He refuses to see any of us. I had to turn tail."

Marc asked with a sinking heart :

" Me too ? He mentioned me ? "

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"He mentioned you. Don't be upset! You are in the block. Side of the living. He, it is already marked on his forehead. Side of the dead."

"Is there no way of saving him?"

"I think not. I have seen the counsel and several others. I have tried to interest them. But what can one do, when the animal refuses to let himself be saved? He even refuses to talk to his counsel, and tells him that he will insult him at the Assizes."

XXIX

The trial did not drag. The fact was clear. There was nothing to be denied, and the accused denied nothing. Jean Casimir came back from Prague again for the Assizes. Though their intervention must needs be vain, the two friends had made it a point of honour to appear as witnesses. It was a painful duty to Marc. It was unbearable to him to exhibit himself in public; he knew that he never did himself justice; shyness and pride paralysed him. And the thought of confronting his old friend in the light of that sinister spectacle, and perhaps having to face his invectives and reproaches, frightened him. He would have liked to run away, or to hide his eyes and stop his ears, like a child, until "it was over. . ." But the greater his fear the braver he was: for he raged against himself: "Go through with it, coward!" He went through with it.

Everything was confused around him, he saw nothing, he remembered nothing about his entry, at the buzzing Palais, into the witness's room. Jean Casimir, very much at his ease, guided him, exchanging a bow or a pleasant word with one or another. Yet he was not much more comfortable than Marc at confronting Bouchard. Their turn soon came. There were not many witnesses to be heard. When he was introduced into the hive of death, Marc stiffened his legs, which felt as though

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they were stuffed with sawdust, and set his teeth, saying to himself: "Don't look! Especially at him! Don't see him!" And he was the first thing he saw, and as soon as he saw him he was caught. He could not tear his eyes away from him. The impatient voice of the judge had to remind him that he was being spoken to. He came back precipitately to the part that was expected of him, but in such a state of confusion that he could not remember his own name. He heard laughter behind him. The judge repressed it, and tried to reassure him. He gradually recovered his presence of mind; he was ashamed that it should be thought that he was afraid; what had taken his breath away was that face, over there, that had stared at him, that well-known face, so changed by the blows of Fate (those of the police included), that he would have doubted if his glance had not seen the fierce eye of the rhinoceros. (Jean Casimir had seen well! But the rhinoceros had only one eye, he was quite one-eyed now.) The two had recognized each other with a look. Marc had seen Bouchard's sudden movement to rise, had seen him immediately pushed back on his bench by the police, and the spurt of fury that flashed from the single eye. Marc had lowered his eyes. He was terrified. It seemed to him that he was guilty, and that Bouchard's voice was about to crush him. He had not seen the second spurt. The look of rage had suddenly softened; and Simon's eye had nothing for him now but surly and cordial contempt. But Marc was expecting every moment that his deposition would be interrupted by an insult. And it took him some time to recover himself. At last, after having floundered childishly, reassuring himself with regard to the Cyclops on the one hand, and on the other hand stung to the quick by the smothered laughter that greeted his blunders; Marc pulled himself together, and like all shy people when their blood is up, he instantly breathed fire. In a moment he leapt over all barriers of prudence. He did not even speak in Simon's defence (which was not expected of him), but eulogized him with provocative violence. At the first attempt to stop

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him he replied, like a young cock ruffling his feathers, by attacking Society. A dry, sharp intervention from the Prosecutor stopped his mouth and crushed him. Out of countenance and forced to retract, the cockerel fell from his poor little flight with clipped wings, back into his pond again, where he floundered once more. And the curtailed deposition ended ingloriously. As Marc was going away, humiliated, he cast another glance of shame at Simon ; Simon's eye was following him with affectionate mockery ; he seemed to be saying : " Poor lad ! " Confused and moved, Marc nodded a brave salute and Simon, raising his hand, dismissed him with a familiar and protective gesture.

In his confusion Marc did not know what happened next ; the welcome which Polyphemus gave Jean Casimir. The ancient hatred was not disarmed. At the sight of the androgyne's refined face, Simon leant forward and barked. He smothered the former friend with his spittle. In a few words he covered him with ignominy. His counsel rushed forward and tried to stop him. The judge thundered that he would have him removed if he continued to insult the witnesses. The other replied insolently that " he forbade people to defend him " ; and he called all the witnesses cringing dogs, and this witness a " bitch ". At last they succeeded in making him keep quiet. Jean Casimir, pale and disdainful, began his deposition, with a clear, cold and well-punctuated delivery. He assumed an indifferent objectivity, every calculated phrase of which might serve to aequit the accused, by lowering him, representing him as a peasant led astray, a victim of the noble and stupid democratic illusion which uproots the son of the soil from the land, untrained, and harnesses him in our schools, to mental exercises, which his brain cannot follow without danger. He said that the old epoch-making word of Barrès : " The Uprooted ", should give place to the more exact term : " The Disorbited ", and that the real responsibility for disorder lay with the system, and not with the tools which it had warped. Such a thesis flattered the secret vanity of the bourgeois who

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listened to it ; they were glad to attribute to themselves, *in pecto*, the privilege of remaining the holders of civilized reason. From time to time, as he spoke, Jean Casimir's cold, keen glance swept round the Court, brushing indifferently, without haste, Simon's scowling face, swollen with fury, apprised him as an object, and returned to other objects, as he finished unrolling his little impeccable phrases. A flattering word from the judge, and silent waves of general sympathy greeted the end of his deposition.

But a dramatic incident supervened. The father of the accused asked to be heard. Though he had received a summons in his Causses, it was not thought likely, knowing him, that the clodhopper would drag himself away from his stony fields, on such a thankless errand. It was naturally expected that he would take the defence of his son. But even before the first word was spoken, a shudder went through the Court. The two men—father and son—were drawn up against each other, and with twisted mouths, glared horribly in each other's faces. A gust of hatred swept over the heads of all present. In the dead silence, after raising his hand and taking the oath, the old man spoke :

He was like his seed, square and heavy, hewn from the block with a hatchet, a heavy trunk on short limbs, lopped and with hands like pincers, screwed to the ends ; the feet, which were not visible, must hold to the soil in the same way. One did not think of looking at the head. It was a member, like the other four. The block cried out (hoarseness and smothered rage prevented him from speaking in a moderate voice) :

" Gentlemen Judges, I have not come to ask you to spare that man. I have come to say : 'Avenge me on him !' From the day when he came forth from the womb of his mother, who died of him, he has been my bane. He has been nothing but a source of trouble. Too proud to work with his hands, he was ashamed of being a peasant ; he preferred to lounge about on benches, doing nothing but cram his brain with damned books, full of vermin, which taught him to insult everything to which

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respect is due. I wonder what you are thinking of, gentlemen of Paris, to poison our lads like that for us. If I had my way, I would shove them all into my manure heap—all those papers and their bum-fodder scribblers! One tried to console oneself by thinking that the dirty bargain might at least bring him some profit. He boasted that he was on the way to becoming some sort of minister, some day or other. He has become what you see: game for the scaffold! One may lead to the other—possibly! But he, he has got stuck half-way. You'd better keep him there! We don't want him back. He has had time to make bad blood enough amongst us. There is not a person of his acquaintance, in the family or in our parts, that he hasn't tried to get money out of. If I were to tell you all the means that wretch there has made use of to milk people, it would be quite enough to get him slipped off to the 'New'. I was the only one it didn't work with. I know all about that. I can't be kidded."

Simon opened his enormous mouth and shouted:
" You were! . . . Old cuckold! . . . "

A burst of nervous laughter shook the Court. It was the relief from tension. The target—the old man—registered: "A hit!" All his gesticulations and vociferations only made it clearer that the blow had struck home. In the uproar that ensued, before the judge managed to get silence re-established, it was easy to reconstruct the village tragicomedy, which had set the old remarried Theseus and his Hippolytus so furiously at odds. The rascal had fouled his own nest, and what is more it was obvious that he had got his Phaedra to open the purse for him as well as the bed. The old man stubbornly refused to admit it. To be robbed enraged him more than to be a cuckold. But he tried clumsily to deny the whole thing. And it was the thief who proclaimed it!

From that moment it was clear that the father was about to consign his own flesh and blood to the executioner. People waited. . . .

They did not have to wait long. As soon as he was

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allowed to speak, the old man cried, brandishing his clenched fists :

" I will not answer all this filth. I have had enough ! I know that villain there no more. He has dishonoured us all. I pray God to forgive me for having pissed him. Judges, he is yours. Do your duty ! I have done mine. Wash me clean of him ! "

He turned, all of a piece, towards his son, for the last time, with bent head and lowering eyes. He spat on the ground, turned away, and made off, horns forward, at a jog-trot.

In the uproar the prosecutor could be heard calling him a " Roman ", and Simon trumpeting, choking with laughter. Then followed a shouting match between him and the judge. Simon wished to unbosom himself of his rancour against his father, who, when he was struggling in poverty, would rather have seen him starve than his pig—the niggard whose harshness had driven him to crime ; to revenge himself he tried not only to denounce the old man's trickery in defrauding the Treasury, but shamelessly to relate the scene from a smutty *fablian*, which he had enacted with the assistance of his step-mother. The public asked nothing better than to hear it. But the Court interposed : in default of virtue (they would have had some trouble in finding it !) they covered the code with their shield. The madman insolently refused to be silent : he defied the judge, and would have come to blows with his counsel if the handcuffs had not restrained him. To put an end to the fight, he had to be removed from the court.

After this, the pleading and summing up seemed to fall flat. He was brought back into court for the sentence. No one was in any doubt about it. The " Yes " was unanimous. " Guilty "—"*in my soul and conscience*". Without extenuating circumstances. The death penalty.

Simon, flushed but unmoved, at the reading of the sentence, darted his eye, like a burning coal, at the court, fiercely taking their measure all round. Then he said :

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" My only regret is that there are not a dozen like me in France, to rip you all open."

As he was being forthwith dragged out of the Court, he howled at them :

" Assassins ! . . . I fling you my head. Eat it ! "

The public howled with him. They all seemed to have gone mad. They had never been so carried away by any play. The true "theatre of the people" so sought for, here we have it ! At least the killing is in earnest ! The mob is not mistaken : they smell blood. They were yelping. There were women nearly in convulsions. They fraternized, without distinction of class. Marc, livid, dragged along by Jean Casimir, was clutched by an unrecognizable Bette, in great excitement, laughing, crying and pouring forth a flood of incoherent words. Jean Casimir, who was on the watch, caught her in a moment, just as she was about to faint. He made her sit down on a step of the staircase. She recovered her few wits, but only to be seized with nausea. Marc was nearly in the same plight : they managed to get her downstairs, but at the bottom she was sick, in a corner. Jean Casimir held her head, in brotherly fashion. He wanted to take her home, but he could not leave either of them. He hoisted them both into a taxi, and gave Bette's address. But she recovered sufficiently to protest with unexpected vigour : she wanted to be taken to Ruche. She was sick again, on the way. Jean Casimir took her upstairs to Ruehe ; came down again, joined Marc in the taxi, and took him to his hotel. Marc, in his helplessness, let himself be led along ; he did not dare to unclench his teeth ; his heart was in his mouth. Not knowing how, he found himself in Jean Casimir's room, in his easy-chair. Jean Casimir was saying :

" Lie down ! "

He felt ashamed. He hardened himself. He said :

" They acted well ! We got our money's worth ! "

Jean Casimir was not taken in by it. He was too shrewd to pursue that subject with him. He watched his coffee boiling

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in an elegant travelling percolator. He called upon Marc to admire it ; and while they inhaled the aroma of their cups, he put on his Harlequin smile to ask :

“ Who is the beast ? ”

“ The beast ? ” repeated Marc in astonishment.

“ I mean Bette’s beast. . . . ”

“ I don’t understand.”

“ Did you look at her ? ”

“ Poor girl ! She looks pretty bad. She has grown thin.”

“ But not in the stomach ! ”

Marc exclaimed. . . . He had taken it in. . . . They spoke no more of Simon that day.

XXX

On the second day, in the evening, Marc was visited by a young man whose ugly, unprepossessing, starveling face seemed familiar to him. Before he could identify it the visitor introduced himself : Simon’s counsel. He did not express himself very well, and his speech was devoid of charm. But he showed sincere emotion. He said that his client had refused to sign the appeal for mercy, and that the end was imminent, but that after vainly pressing Simon to express his last wishes, he had been called back just as he was leaving, to be told that Simon would be very glad to see Marc.

Marc was not glad. Anguish rose to his neck once more. But with contracted throat, he said :

“ I will see him then, if it is possible.” He hoped that it would not be.

The counsel said that he had secured the necessary permission, and if Marc were willing, they would go to the prison at once : a taxi was waiting downstairs. They could not be sure of the morrow.

Marc got up.

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" In that case, let us go ! "

The lawyer saw his trouble and understood it. In the taxi he tried awkwardly to express his commiseration for his client : he knew beforehand that the case was lost : that indeed was the very reason why it had been left to him ; and he had accepted it, because he had himself experienced the despair, to which misery, the thirst for enjoyment which will never be satisfied, and the savage abandonment of one's family, can drive a young perverted post-War peasant, in Paris. His bitterness was profound ; but there was no vigour in it. The man had been born conquered. It was not good to be taken under his ægis. Marc, who listened without hearing much, instinctively drew away from him.

The order had been given at the prison. They passed in ; and at the door of the cell the lawyer shook hands with Marc and left him alone. Marc entered as if into the grave.

A white light, despoiled of life, fell from the high barred window of unpolished glass. There was no shadow. Shadow is life.

The dead man was standing up in a corner. He came towards Marc, who stood petrified upon the threshold, and unwittingly he recoiled half a step, and struck his back against the closed door. Simon saw his fear and laughed ironically.

" Are you afraid ? . . . Come, my lad, pull yourself together ! It's not your skin they're after. . . . Your skin is your own, lucky chap ! "

Marc blushed. He said with shame and grief :

" Simon, do you think I care about my skin ? My God, my God, what's it worth, anyway ? "

Simon said good-naturedly :

" It's not worth much. Stick to it all the same ! It suits you."

He was standing before Marc, with legs apart, his arms hanging down. Marc, who had not dared to look at him yet, raised his eyes, and saw the broad face with the shaven crown, smiling at him without unkindness. He had an impulse. His

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frightened hands, hidden behind his, were stretched out. Simon seized them.

"A dirty job I've put upon you! . . . Eh, my boy? . . . I knew it! It's really the reason why I did it. . . . I had betted my head against myself that you wouldn't come. . . . You have come. I've lost. It's pure gain. . . ."

"Simon," said Marc, in a trembling voice, "what can I do to help you?"

"Nothing. By being there. By proving to me that in this brothel of a world, which I am about to leave, there is still a little boy who has not completely sold himself, who does not belie himself, who does not deny me. . . . For all your trembling: yes, you are trembling. . . . As you did at the Assizes. . . . You did not come out strong! They frightened you. You were afraid; you made haste to ask pardon; you withdrew what you had said. . . . Never mind! You did say it. . . . All alone against the wolves, the 'beaks' and the swine. . . . It was not so bad for a little boy! I was grateful to you for it. There is more honesty in your guts than in all the flock put together."

Marc was more humiliated than flattered. He had an imperceptible impulse to get angry, and he answered bitterly:

"Thank you for the certificate of honesty!"

"You are thinking to yourself that I am not qualified to give it? You are wrong, my boy. I know all about it! . . . By honesty I do not mean a castrated sheep. Though you have soiled your coat in blood and filth, you are honest if you do not run away, if you do not say, like a coward: 'It isn't me'—if you spit in their faces saying: '*I ! Me, me, adsum qui feci!*'—if you accept your responsibility."

"And you accept it?" asked Marc.

"And I accept it. If it were to do again, I would do it. . . . I would do it better."

Marc had no wish to discuss the matter. He murmured:

"What is the use?"

"What is the use of living? To live is to kill or be killed."

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"No!" cried Marc, making a gesture with his hands, to shield himself like a child.

Simon regarded him with a smile of pity!

"Sucking calf! You still want your cow's teat. . . . Come! the horns are sprouting under your forehead."

"In the arena the bull is always condemned beforehand."

"Well, try, at least, to make it a fine show! And rip up the matador! . . . As for me, I got my horns caught, like an idiot, in the horses' entrails. . . . You will do better."

"Did you make me come here to tell me that?"

"And why not?" said the cyclops, drawing himself up to his full height. "My testament to Society."

"You bequeath them a monster?"

The single eye had a gleam of gaiety and grew human. Simon squeezed his young friend's thin arms in his strong fists:

"Poor little monster! He's afraid of his own shadow. . . . But for all you can do, I know you, you'll fight, whether you want to or not! He who is born a bull dies a bull. He cannot be castrated. . . . But that is your business! I have nothing to do with it. . . . If I have made you come here, my boy—I am not going to lie at this hour—it is because, though one may have tanned oneself, have a heart harder than one's fists, hate mankind, and regret that one was not able to blow up the whole show, at the moment of escaping from it, there are minutes when one feels weakness in the legs; and in the tongue—the bull's dry tongue—an itch to lick just once, just once more, the hide of another young bull. . . ."

He looked at him, who would fain have escaped. He felt the shudder in the arms under his fingers. He whispered with awkward tenderness:

"Could you possibly bear to kiss me?"

Marc kissed him, more dead than alive.

"Thank you. Now go!" said Simon. "You are the only one I have loved."

Marc groped blindly for the door. Simon's fist guided him

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to it fraternally. He had not even strength to look back, to say farewell to the man who was to die.

XXXI

On the morrow the head fell.

In those days Marc poured forth all his thoughts, more than ever, in his letters to his mother. For kindred souls, absence is the greatest benefit : it frees them from bashfulness, and breaks down all barriers between them.

It was a strange correspondence. No one would have ascribed it to a mother and son. They both felt themselves on the outskirts of Society. They were not only free, in the depths of their hearts, from its prejudices, its conventional morality and its laws—thousands of men and women, to-day, have got that far—but with a sure instinct they had made their own laws for themselves, their moral pact of alliance and union : the secret pact, written down by nature, of the mother and her young, in the jungle. As the young one grew up the character of their relationship had changed, the mother had imperceptibly given place to the elder ; they were nearer together : for they were now upon the same bank, and the river no longer flowed between them ; they drank there side by side ; each brought the spoil of his hunting to the other—their experiences of the jungle : they shared them, old or new ; and it was not the oldest that seemed the least new to the young one ; nor the newest the least substantial to the elder.

Marc related all the drama which had come so near his life that he felt as if the blade, in falling, had whistled close to his ear. He said it was but a matter of chance that his head had not fallen by that blow : Simon might have been Marc, and Marc Simon : despair, madness, and crime prowl within us all : one resists, the other succumbs ; do we know why ? " It

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was he, but it might have been me. I have no right to condemn anyone."

He was not surprised to hear Annette answer :

" No, neither you nor I have any right to condemn this unhappy man," nor that she should speak of Simon with understanding pity. But she added—and his heart leapt :

" But it is not true, my Marc, that he might have been you, and you might have been him. You are the man you are : yourself. . . . My fruit. . . . It may be torn from the tree. It cannot be worm-eaten. . . . Crime and shame prowl, yes, I know it, in you and in me. But they will never get into our bed. However much you may be tempted . . . (you have been . . . you have not told me so, but I suspect it. . . . And how do you know that I have not been ? . . .) But, thank God, they will have none of us ! "

Marc felt hot all over. He shuddered. . . . " You have been tempted. . . ." And she also, that woman, she " has been tempted. . . ." And she tells him so ! She comes and with one gesture sweeps away his secret fear. If she has been on the brink of the same abysses, and is so sure of her steps, it would be a fine thing if he, a man, should not be ! To test her, however, he went still further in his confidence than he had ever been. He wrote to her of certain hours of that madness which broods in the bodies of young men, when he awoke with a start, panting, with clutching fingers, on the brink of infamy. Afterwards he thought, " What have I said ! . . ." But she answered :

" You have been on the brink. You have looked into the depths. That is well. You will not be taken unawares again. I made my Marc so that he should take risks. But I made him so that he should resist. Risk ! I risk, and I have risked. It is not given to everybody to be lost."

And she added, with her free, grave, mischievous smile :

" I have tried twenty times. I have never been able. You will be no cleverer. Let us resign ourselves, my boy, and kiss me ! "

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When he came to these lines, Marc danced with joy. The tiled floor of his room shook with it. He blew the shame from his lips with a cloud of cigarette smoke.

"Go to other lungs!"

In the streets that day he drew in the tainted air in bravado. He said to himself :

"I have my air. I have my firm earth under my feet. I have my Rivière in my blood."

But the river rolled no gold. And life was hard that winter. Luck did not favour Marc's courage ; and his health suffered from privation. He would not appeal to his mother ; and he even had the absurd pride to refuse when she offered him money. In the first place, he was not sure that she was not depriving herself ; and in the second place, the silly little cock would not admit the possibility of taking money from a woman. . . . Is a mother a woman ? . . . Well, yes, to him ! . . . His letter of refusal rapped curtly . . . "Don't insist !" She did not insist. . . . These stupid men ! . . . She was very glad that he should be one.

But if he did not take Annette's money, he held on to the thought of her ; and if he had not carried it within him, that hard winter, he would have felt very lonely and frozen. He warmed himself at it, as at a fire that none could see. Not even she, or so he thought. But she was too closely linked to him by the most secret fibres not to see in certain words, hard and close as lumps of coal, the gleam of the concentrated spark of fire. She guessed dimly that she was the object of a violent, pure, and almost religious exaltation. She thought it absurd : but there was a humble gratitude for it in her heart. Combatants need an illusion of love and veneration. . . . "*Non sum digna.* . . . But thank you, my little knight."

This strange, unspoken communion between them bore the young combatant above the black, icy waters of those months of solitude and penury without sinking. But his feet were very cold ! And he was stamping them in the street, late that

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night, when he thought he saw, through the fog, a familiar figure, in a badly-lit corner of the pavement. He took a sudden turn, to see without being seen. He was not mistaken : it was she—it was Ruche. Squeezed against a closed newspaper kiosk, so that the light of the electric door-lamp might not fall upon her, she was watching the door of a house. She seemed to be hiding, the top part of her body leaning out of the shelter. Marc stood still, concealing himself a few steps off. The street was deserted. A clock struck one o'clock in the morning. Ruche did not move. Her eyes were riveted on the closed door. . . . The door opened. Ruche was about to spring forward ; and her right arm shot out of the shadow, pointed, but immediately drew back. . . . The man who came out was not the person she expected. . . . She was hidden again, listening to the receding footsteps of the stranger. And Marc had drawn back also. But he had seen the arm, and now he knew. He approached noiselessly, went round the kiosk and seized her. She gave a jump of fear and anger ; she struggled without a cry, but digging her nails in. Marc had begun by snatching the weapon from her, twisting her wrist. He held her still, pressing her hard against the wall, while he whispered in the nape of the enraged woman, who bent over his hand, biting it :

“Ruche ! It’s I ! It’s Marc ! Ruche, my child, don’t be afraid ! . . . Will you let go ! ”

After a short but violent struggle, the frenzied girl gave way, conquered. Her last struggles were quelled in a fit of sobbing. Marc held her tight, her weeping face against his breast.

“Come ! Come ! ”

He raised her chin ; as he could not get at his handkerchief, with a nurse’s gesture, he wiped her cheeks and nose with his fingers ; she let him do what he liked—she was broken. He pulled her cloth cap, which was falling, back on to her forehead ; he rearranged the unfastened coat ; and when he saw that she did not resist, he passed his arm through hers, put his hand

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under her elbow and led her away. She walked like a somnambulist. . . . Where were they going? They did not know. She had no opinion to express. She went where he went, unseeing, crossed the road, turning docilely to right and left. What did she care? She would have walked into the water just as readily. Marc talked mechanically, neither of them knowing what he said. He was asking himself: "What shall I do with her?" . . . Take her home? To leave her alone in that state was neither human nor prudent. His steps led him towards his hotel in rue Cujas. At the door, he made up his mind.

"Come up! . . ."

And he thought aloud:

"Each in turn!"

It was his turn to shelter the desperate. She made no objection, no gesture of refusal or acquiescence. She went up.

In the miserable room, dirty and untidy (he was ashamed that she should see it, but she saw nothing), she stood there stock still. He made her sit down on the bed; she did everything he made her do without reacting, her arms hanging down, her hands lying flat. He knit his brows, bit his lips, and made up his mind. He took off her cap, undid her coat, untied her shoes, and laid her on his bed. Now the body had a nervous reaction, it shivered under a wave of cold. Marc murmured:

"Get into bed! . . . Let me do it, my child! . . ."

He raised her to open the bed under her. She let him undress her, her eyes open, her look vacant. Her thin shoulders did not feel the touch of the clumsy fingers that removed her garments. He piled on the bed all the clothes he could find in his trunk, that were warm and heavy. And while he was warming a drink on his spirit lamp, he sat down by the bed, and slipping an arm between the sheets, he warmed the icy cold feet in her stockings, with his fingers. They both sank into the same stillness of exhaustion. The hissing of the kettle boiling over on the flame aroused him. He got up, made some

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grog, and raised the woman's head to make her swallow a few mouthfuls. At first the liquid ran out of her mouth ; it ran from her chin down her neck ; the burning woke her. She looked at Marc at last with eyes that consented to see him. She looked at his anxious eyes, the steaming glass he was holding, his awkward movements as he tried to put the spoon into her mouth. She opened her mouth and swallowed like a child. A little colour came back to her cheeks. She waved away the spoon with a movement of her hand. Marc, relieved at seeing her come back to life, pressed her temples between his fingers and said :

" Now go to sleep ! Are you nice and warm ? "

And almost at once he noticed the dirty pillow-case under her head and was overcome with confusion. Instead of hiding it, he said :

" Pardon ! "

He fetched a clean towel to spread between the pillow and her head. This artless shame woke Ruche completely ; and she even smiled after she had lifted a corner of the towel ; she took away the towel, threw it on to the floor, and resting her cheek on the pillow, she closed her eyes.

Marc waited a moment longer, then, seeing that she was quiet, he settled himself as best he could on two chairs, and put out the lamp.

Ruche's voice said, in the dark :

" But what about you ? How are you going to spend the night ? "

" Don't worry ! I'm all right."

" You can't sleep on a chair."

" It won't be the first time."

" Well, at least come and put the chair against the bed, so that you won't fall ! "

He installed himself on the two chairs, along the side of the bed, his feet towards Ruche's head, his head almost resting on her feet.

" Yes, hold them for me ! " said Ruche. " It does me good."

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He took hold of them again.

After a time, she said :

" You are good."

" I don't know. . . . I don't think so."

" When I say ' good ', it's by comparison."

" With whom ? "

" With the other dogs."

" I am one, too."

" And I, a bitch."

" Yes, you were to-night."

" And not even to be capable of tearing his stomach ! "

She kicked about in the bed.

" Come, stop it ! Don't kick about ! You're on the lead."

He held her tight round the ankles.

" Listen, Marc, you must at least know, since Fate has insisted on your throwing yourself into my web. . . ."

" I don't want to know anything . . . know what ? A stupid tale of love betrayed . . . if one can call that love. . . ."

" Yes, I do call it . . . And what do I care if it is called that or anything else ? . . . He wanted me, and I wanted him. He took me, and I took him. And now he throws me over ; he has had enough of me. He wants another ; he is taking another. I want to kill him. . . ."

Marc growled :

" Ruche, you've done with that nonsense surely ? You're not going to start again ? "

Ruche swallowed hard, breathed heavily two or three times, and said :

" It's done with. Yes. It was a failure. One doesn't do it again. . . . But I want to tell you about it, to relieve my mind, to revenge myself. . . ."

" My poor girl, your little tales disgust me. Shut up ! . . . Besides, I'm dropping with sleep. I'm dying. . . ."

Ruche laughed nervously.

" So much the worse ! Die ! But listen ! I don't care if you are disgusted ; I'm disgusted too. I'll rub your nose in

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it. . . ." (She had caught hold of him by the ears and rubbed his nose against the sheet). . . . " You played the Newfoundland and fished me out of water against my will. . . . So much the worse for you ! To complete the rescue you must swallow my bag of gall."

" Go ahead !" said Marc resignedly.

But he soon fell asleep. Ruche, sitting up in bed, plunged into her story at a breathless rate, clutching his hair and shaking his head from time to time to recall his wandering attention. But sleep got the best of it, Marc only perceived her rumbling as a rather agitated lullaby. He thought of a night at sea. . . . His last persisting gleam of consciousness was of two feet in his hands, ever moving about and doubling themselves up like hands as she talked. . . .

She went on to the end of her tale, though she had realized long before that he could not hear her. Then she stopped at last, satisfied and relieved. At the sudden stoppage of the windmill, Marc moved in his sleep. The chair that his legs were on rocked. Ruche caught him round the waist and, with both arms round his hips, pulled the sleeper on to the bed beside her. He was fully dressed, but barefoot. She laid Marc's head at her feet and his feet on the pillow near her cheek. Then she joined him in sleep. They spent the night so, side by side, she under the bedclothes, he above them. They were both tired out. They lay all of a piece. They slept, as one can at that age, seven hours on end without stirring. It was nearly eleven o'clock in the morning when both woke at once, in the same position.

Marc, in amazement, sat up suddenly, saw his feet against Ruche's cheek, and hastily drew them up under him, stammering :

" Pardon, pardon ! "

Ruche laughed and said :

" Thank you ! "

She was sitting up on her heels like himself. There they sat staring at each other like a couple of bonzes.

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" You make me ashamed," said Marc.

Ruche rubbed her nose against his.

" Be ashamed, be ashamed, silly kid ! . . . I never had a better pillow. . . . What a lovely sleep ! I am washed clean of all the gall that was poisoning me. I am sure that you never heard a word, and remember nothing of what I inflicted on you last night. . . ."

Marc thought a moment.

" Not a word."

" Never mind ! You got the lot. And whatever you do, my friend, you will remember it bit by bit some day ; for I poured it into you through your skull : I spoke with my lips close against it."

" A charming present ! "

" It can't be helped. One can only get relief by emptying everything into someone else."

" And are you relieved ? "

" Absolutely. Stomach empty. Heart-free. Clean and fresh."

" That's good ! Then I'll say no more."

" You are right ! For now if you dared allude to anything that happened last night I would deny it. I do deny it. Just you dare ! . . . Nothing happened at all."

She defied him. Marc stared open-mouthed at the impudence of her fresh, laughing face, that showed no trace of last night's convulsions.

" Damn women ! " he said. " They have seven souls and seven faces."

Said Ruche :

" That's very few."

She took his cheeks between her hands and pinched them.

" My good boy ! . . . My little boy ! . . . How thin you are ! . . . What don't I owe you ! . . . Have you the least idea ? . . . No, don't try. It's better that I should be the only one to realize it."

" But I realize it very well, too."

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"Did you ever! . . . The conceited creature! The vain fool! . . . Now he is going to point out the value of services rendered. Perhaps he'll even try to make me pay for them. . . ."

"Why, certainly! You must pay."

"Jew! . . . What's the price?"

"Your word of honour to me that you will never try it again."

"Every time I do, I'll come and ask your permission first."

"And if I refuse?"

"I will obey you."

Their teasing had suddenly changed to a firm and serious tone, and frank eyes that said:

"This is serious!"

"Shake!" said Marc. "You are bound." They held each other by both hands.

"And now," said Ruche, disengaging her legs from their sheath, "let's go and eat. I'm ravenous!"

She jumped out of bed.

Marc was embarrassed. His purse was flat. Ruche suspected it. She said boldly:

"I invite you. I stand treat!"

Marc protested energetically.

"My boy, you'll let me have my way. Otherwise everything is cancelled! I'll go on with my killing."

Marc argued.

"Shut your mouth! You can open it again before your plate."

"Ruche, you want to humiliate me?"

"Why, certainly! It's excellent for your health. You're bursting with pride. I must bleed you. You've scrubbed me down. Each in turn! And tell me, you've never eaten a woman's money, have you now?"

"Certainly not!"

"Splendid! You shall eat some of mine." She rubbed her

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hands, did a pirouette, took his arm, pinched it on the stairs, and went out into the street with him.

At the students' restaurant they devoured underdone meat. Ruche added to the ordinary menu an *entremets*, a nice ripe Brie, and a bottle of old Beaune. Her eyes teased him, sparkling with mischief. It would not have done to defy her ! Resigned and well pleased, Marc let her have her way, his conscience dumb and drowsy, like an overfed watchdog. It was good to eat one's fill for once !

When they came out of the restaurant, Marc had to go to his work. Ruche said :

" Give me your key."

In the evening he found her installed in his room, in the midst of his shirts and socks, busily darning. His trunk and all his drawers were empty. Papers and clothes were scattered over the bed, the two chairs and the floor. And everything was not clean, not by a long way ! Marc always threw his dirty linen into a corner of the cupboard. Ruche had dragged everything out, arranged, counted and examined ; she had even done a bit of washing in the basin. On a line in front of the window dripping flannels and handkerchiefs were hung out.

Marc would have liked to sink through the ground. His most sensitive point was that any bodily ailment, or the shameful state of his underwear should be seen. He dropped on to the bed and covered his eyes with his hand. He repeated plaintively :

" Ah ! No, no, no ! "

Ruche's voice said good-naturedly :

" Come, come ! . . . Isn't it quite natural ? "

He groaned :

" All those rags. . . ."

" Precisely. They were in great need of my fingers."

" No ! Dirtying them with all that muck ! "

" Do you suppose they're not used to it ? Every woman gets plenty of that sort of thing ! "

" It isn't right ! No, no ! You had no right . . . "

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"I've got any right I like to take. I had to get even with you again after last night. I've had a regular go at it this afternoon ! I told you I would give you a scrub down. . . . Well, now I have. . . . You dirty boy ! "

Marc was rushing from the room, choking with shame. Ruche flung aside her work, ran after him, caught him by the arm, and brought him back.

"My dear little chap . . . I like you much better like this. . . ."

Marc still kept his head turned away. Ruche took it by the chin and turned it on its pivot.

"You great silly ! . . . We're brothers—brothers in misery. . . ."

"Brother pigs," said Marc, growling, laughing, touched.

"What could be better than that ? "

He helped her to pick up the linen. It was getting dark. They had to light up.

"That's enough for to-day ! " said Ruche. "It will take another afternoon. I'll come back to-morrow."

"What ! " he said, "are you going ? "

"Of course. I'm going home."

She saw his disappointment.

"Yes, my friend, one can't risk the fine adventure of last night twice over."

He looked sheepish. She laughed.

"Don't you think so ? When, by an impossibility, a thing has been such a success for once, it would be tempting the devil to try again."

"The devil asks no better than to be tempted."

"Sure ! . . . The she-devil too ! "

"Well, then ? "

"Well then, no."

"You're right. What we have had is too good."

She tucked her hair under her cap with her fingers, looking at herself in the glass, which hung on the window ; she saw Marc standing behind her.

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" All the same, you're a good boy."

" And you're not so bad ! "

" Quite bad enough for my lovers, I can assure you."

She turned, on her high horse.

" Well then, we ? "

" Well then, we . . . Just so ! What luck that we are not ! Come, don't pull a polite face ! "

" It isn't politeness ! "

" Yes, it is, liar ! . . . And say with me : ' What luck ! ' . . . "

He held out his hands. She took them.

" What luck that you are you, and I am I, and that we are holding hands ! "

Teasingly :

" It's feet we were holding."

" You have walked over me, and I have walked over you. Friends, lovers—if we are not either, Ruche, what are we ? "

" Solid ground to each other: We were sinking in the bog. We recovered our footing, got back to solid ground. Now we start again. *For good-bye—once is not a habit—we can kiss each other.*"

They did, heartily, like two children.

" But you will come back ? " asked Marc.

" I shall have to ! Ragamuffin ! I've got your duds. . . . Besides, we've said nothing to-day. To-morrow we'll talk."

XXXII

They did not talk the next day. When Marc came in, late, from his work, Ruche was gone—the pile of linen tidied away, and only one pair of socks on the table, the hole in each, through which six out of ten toes must have stuck, clearly displayed. It was like an impudent visiting card, saying : " You will see me to-morrow."

He did see her. It was Saturday. They had the whole afternoon to talk in. She sat on the bed, he bestrode a chair.

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They burned their fingers with their cigarettes, forgetting to smoke them. Intimacy had come unsought quite simply and without effort. Ruche revealed her mysteries. Her lovers were a pretty bit of "swank"! She had never had any except the hero of that night's ambush. She admitted, mockingly, with assumed cynicism, that during her free life in Paris, which actually courted risks, she had never been able to make up her mind to take the plunge: a quasi physical repugnance had always prevented her at the last moment. "Yet," she protested, "I am whole and healthy, I have natural desires, and I am not afraid of satisfying them—I saw that clearly with that idiot! . . . But why should it have been with that beast, that great horse . . . (I'd like to break a whip on his back) . . . instead of someone I like . . . you, for instance? . . ."

Marc let her talk. Then he said: "You are a good French-woman at bottom, forcing yourself to play a part that doesn't suit you. You stick to it through obstinacy in defiance of the old folk. Your proper place is in your own province along with them. . . ." (She protested.) . . . "You were never made to go about at night hunting lovers with a gun. You are meant to have one good and only husband in your bed, for your whole life, and conscientiously to manufacture children with him—lots of them—I can see them hanging to your breasts."

"I haven't got any. Just feel!"

"Little cows give the best milk."

"Not even a cow! A skinny she-goat, running wild. And you suppose that she will let herself be tied to a hedge for life?"

"You can be a she-goat in thought, if you like, cutting capers, biting, and chewing bits from other hedges. You will play your husband false, ten times over, in your thoughts. And even, good Lord! I don't see why you shouldn't really play him false once or twice. Once or twice in a lifetime is nothing to make a fuss about."

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" I'd like to see you at it, brigand ! "

" No, no, I didn't mean myself."

" But tell me, Marc, tell me frankly, ever since we have known each other, have you never once thought of it ? "

" What ? "

" That you should be the one I might be false to ? "

" No, truly, never. Are you thinking of it ? "

" I'm trying this very moment. I can't."

" We are not made for double harness."

" And yet we understand each other so well ! You are the only one who has ever seen through me, and I see you. . . . That is just why ! It takes those who see nothing to unite."

" It needs darkness to take each other."

" You'll have it ; you'll make it for yourself, I feel certain ; you'll fall into the net of the woman who can do you the most harm. You will never want one who is always the same, restful, that you can be sure of. The light would be too strong."

" I dare say that's true."

" We each know the other's fate best, and what course would be for the other's good. . . . And, naturally, neither of us will take it ! "

" Then I didn't make such a bad shot—you admit it ?—What you ought to be, and what you are ? "

" What I am not. Yes, you are right, this life I lead in Paris is killing me. I was born Ruche, to have a hive of my own in the blue-grey sunshine of my Loire. These huge ant-hills, with their poisonous toadstools of thoughts fill me with horror and disgust. I would like to set fire to the lot. Gas them, quickly, to have done with all this filth ! "

" Well, go away ! Fly ! Go back to the fields ! "

" I can't."

" Why ? "

" The old man. He dared me."

" You think the lesson you have given him is not enough to make him behave ? "

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"Oh ! I'm not afraid of him now ! He is ill. He'll keep quiet. His only fear would be that I should go away again."

"Well then ?"

"It is for him to make the first move."

"Do you want him to beg pardon ?"

"No, just lift a finger !"

"And if he doesn't you won't budge ?"

"No, certainly not."

"Pigheaded mule !"

"No, she-goat !"

He went on with his exhortations. She listened in silence. She thought *in petto* that he was right. But she was quite determined to remain in the wrong.

To change the conversation (but she silently brooded over it) she spoke of Bette. Her pregnancy had all but ended tragically. The distracted little bourgeoisie had foolishly persisted in denying it, when it was as plain as the nose on her face ; she could not make up her mind to accept it, or get rid of it. By sad good luck, a fall downstairs had delivered her from it, but it was very nearly the death of her.

"Who was the rascal ?" asked Marc.

"She didn't even know for certain. Kind, weak, simple, silly, they took advantage of her as much as they liked."

"Who ?"

"All of them, Véron, Simon, Chevalier, the whole gang. You are the only one who refrained."

"My poor Ruche ! I understand your hatred."

"No, it is wrong even to hate. One must know that there is only one law in the jungle : to be the strongest. Woe to the underdog !"

"One can't be always on the defensive."

"Attack then ! There is no other choice !"

"What about us at this moment, Ruche ?"

She came and knelt before him and laid her cheek in his hands :

"God's truce."

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He stroked her head gently.

"Well, you must take advantage of it. Escape, Ruche. Get out of the jungle ! You'll end by leaving your bones there, your little white bones. It would be pitiful. You are much better than you try to make out. It's no use your trying to make me believe it. I don't believe you. . . ."

Ruche kissed the palms of his hands.

"But what is wrong with us all ? We have all been stung. . . ."

"Everything is upset. War, wars, the savagery of the new times have destroyed all the old nests and driven the ants mad. You, who have the chance, rebuild yours ! It is the safest. I don't suppose that you will keep to your nest. But you need one. To rebuild you must begin at the beginning. Build your cell, then your honeycomb, then your hive."

Ruche got up, sighed, put on her hat, whistled, stretched her arms, and said :

"Father Marc, you ought to hold the catechism class," laughed in his face, pulled his nose, and went home.

.
She did nothing. She let time slip by. One day she came again wearing black gloves.

"The old man is dead. You were right. I waited too long. I am going away. Too late ! . . ."

She spoke without emotion. But he saw her sorrow and bitter remorse.

"What is done is done," he said, squeezing her hand.
"Look ahead, my Ruche !"

"Your Ruche, yes, well, the hive shall be rebuilt. I'll try. . . . But you, my boy, I am anxious about you ; you are staying here. . . . Promise me, at least, that some day you will come and taste it !"

"Taste what ?"

"Ruche. Me. My family. My home."

"I promise, Ruche. Make your honey !"

They hugged each other tightly.

XXXIII

Marc plunged into the vat once more. He was in that fury of youth when "*thy heart melteth in the hurricane—when all things sound in thee, and thrill, and tremble,*" that participation in elementary forces, which the young Prometheus of Frankfort declaimed, with the wind in his hair, in his "*Wanderer's Storm-Song*". Marc, alas! had not his magnificent lyrical gift. Still less did he possess his privileges of a young *grand bourgeois* who knows every hunger of the spirit, but never that of the stomach, nor the misery of an exhausted body, over-worked in the struggle for bread. Marc had his feeling of torrential force, and of communion with Nature, good or evil: the same breed . . .

" He whom thou forsakest not, Genius,
Neither rain nor hurricane
Shall shake his heart,
He whom thou forsakest not, Genius
Shall sing in the face of the rain cloud,
Shall sing in the face of the hail storm,
As thou, oh ! lark,
As thou, on high. . . .
He whom thou forsakest not, Genius. .

The genius—the daemon—did not forsake him. He flapped his wings in fury. But (enough of lying, poets !) the lark on high, only sings because it is drunk with grain stolen below. You never lacked bread, Prometheus of the Main ! But Marc had to seek his, like the sparrows of Paris, in the horse-dung. (And even horse-dung is growing rare in a town that reeks with the petrol of motor cars.)

He wore himself out, in desperation, never succeeding in getting the food and rest indispensable for the subsistence of a young body burning at every point. At last he managed to

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secure a temporary job, tiring and badly paid, as placer and adjuster of radio apparatus. (Like all boys of his age—even those with the least inclination for science—he manipulated "mechanisms" with ease.) So he was now enrolled as one of the gang who tend that incredible machine for making the cerebral hodge-podge of the new human race by cramming it with a medley of noises, musical sounds and their vermin (they call them parasites) hissing, grindings, rumblings, electric explosions, ear-splitting whistlings—a Babel tower of sermons and advertisements of apothecaries or demagogues, a fair in the "did you see me?" market-place of politics and hustings, jazz and chorals, quick marches and symphonies, juxtaposed, superposed, in two, three, and five layers—a march of bugles and clarions ("Dieu ! que j'aime les militaires") with Beethoven's Ninth—an election parade on a melody by Debussy—or the bawling of a commercial traveller of Toulouse, competing with the *vocifero* of a tenor of Milan. . . . That astounding march past of all countries, in ranks of waves, which turns the map of Europe into a puzzle, in which all languages, all races, are kneaded under the roller into a paste, nameless, save at Carpharnaum. . . . But we must remember also—no evil without good!—the hallucinated ecstasy of the poor old forsaken Schulzes, chained to the hearth, visited in their bed by some such heavenly messenger, sent from the far corners of the world. . . .

Marc, overwrought, bound all day to manipulating the skins of Æolus, came out of the sound vat with his ears pulsating with vibrations to the pitch of fever. It seemed that, like the young Siegfried, his ears had been opened to all the quivering of the forest. But this was not the beautiful cool woods on the banks of the Silil, wherein Wagner strained his haunted ears. Marc heard harmonies coming from iron bars on a lorry, from lines shaken by the heavy tramways, from everything around him, from everything he touched, the leaves he turned, the tinkling of windows, that made him jump, the air that buzzed in his ears. . . . No more rest! . . . Not a hole of

nothingness anywhere to sink into. . . . And is this the music of the spheres, promised us by the great liars of Greece and Rome, such poor musicians, with their closed ears (they heard nothing!). God's mercy! Who will give us back the silence, earless death, and the good grave!"

Marc put the finishing touch to his unhinged condition by using ether, of which some wicked lad had given him a taste. He had spasms, nightmares, an exacerbated, disconnected consciousness that lost its ego, or found it multiplied, in bits, in giddy swirls, with no fixed point. That, after all, is a disease of European consciousness, following upon the measureless, uncurbed and fruitless hypertension of the War years; a disease which the intellectual cultivate, as they do all diseases of the mind. (Is not mind itself a disease?) It is found from the northern seas to those of Africa, in Joyce, Proust, and Pirandello, and in all the court players of all the flutes by which the *bourgeoisie-gentilhommière* the new rich of the mind, are kept dancing. The astonishing thing is not that the disease should exist, but that the professional thinkers, professors and critics, should content themselves with recording it, and burning incense before it, to show themselves "up to date", instead of reacting vigorously, to save the sanity of the European mind, the guarding of which is the reason for their existence. Marc, unattracted by the neurasthenic snobbery of the Franco-Semitic Androgyn, with the velvety eyes; or by the paralytic shamelessness of the Irishman, was more open to the contagion of the disease of the disintegrated ego in the hallucinated Sicilian Pirandello: for in him the disintegration is accompanied by an explosive violence which is linked with action and releases it. Marc's temperament was akin to his. But this mental delirium—inoffensive in a writer who has a vent for it (especially when he has reached maturity) has repercussions in a young man's body scarcely formed, feverish, undermined, exhausted with work, fasting and torments, which may very well endanger his life.

The brave lad struggled on as best he could, never crying

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mercy nor asking help. Breathless, with clenched fists, half his body bent over the abyss, he looked on at the dreadful dissolution of a world in its grave ; he inhaled the putrefaction exhaled by the corpse of a civilization ; nigh to falling with holy horror and asphyxiation, but pierced by the shocks of violent eruptions, he waited, he called with blind, desperate faith, till from the mouth of the corpse should rise the straight green ear, seed-bearer of the new life, the new world which was to come. For it would come ! It must come. . . .

" I feel it burning in my loins. I will die or sow it ! Even though I die, I sow it. It will gush forth ! It is—I am, dead or alive, the flood of substance, the flood of spirit, which renews itself, the eternally Reborn. . . ."

XXXIV

The little hotel in the Latin Quarter sweated fever. At night there was the buzzing of a mass of flies. Everything could be heard from garret to basement : knocking at doors, creaking of beds and floors, the idiotic laughter of drunken prostitutes, discussions and embraces on the mattresses. It seemed as if one shared it all. All for each ! One was drowned in the sweat of all these bodies. One searched for a dry place in the sheets. The whole flock had slept in them.

Marc had drifted there at last, through penury, exhaustion, and even through disgust. There comes a moment when disgust is so intense that you abandon yourself to it, and are submerged : there is no more choice between the more or the less stinking : both stink. He had chosen a room at the end of the passage, furthest from the staircase, the last room but one, where the noise was least ; but light and air were likewise least. The yellow paned window, which was nearly always shut, to keep out the nauseating stench, gave on to the dirty wall of a little yard, where never a ray of light had lost its way. The last room, next to his own, was occupied by a silent woman,

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out all day, like himself, who came home late, shut herself in, worked and read late into the night, and was sleepless like himself (he could hear her slightest movement through the partition, thin as paper) ; she made no noise. He would not have known the sound of her voice if she had not spoken, moaned, and even cried out in her sleep. A woman's voice, rapid, broken, with rich, plaintive, angry modulations. At first, awakened by this flux of words in a language he did not understand, he thought that she was not alone, and rapped angrily on the wall. Then she fell silent, and he heard her, long afterwards, tossing sleeplessly in bed, like himself. He was sorry for his hastiness, for he knew too well the value of a few hours sleep to those in trouble, not to feel remorseful for having deprived another of them. He imagined (not without reason) that the woman he had awakened from her monologue was tense with fear of falling into it again. And in truth the cheeks of the stranger who had suffered the shock of the rough awakening, were burning in the dark. Not that she cared whether she inconvenienced her neighbours or not. She had an absolute contempt for her surroundings. But she was angry at having betrayed herself in her sleep. And she kept herself awake till morning.

They got used to each other in time. He forced himself to bear this flow of words in the night ; and in the end he found company in them : the voice was beautiful, grave, slightly veiled, sometimes bitter, sometimes sorrowful : he pitied her. Here was another who had borne more than her share of life's burden. He was not aware that he was himself a spectacle of the same kind to the other. She could hear him speaking and moving on the other side of the wall. But she did not try to wake him ; and he did not know, when he awoke, that he had spoken. Many others in the house spoke and were agitated in their dreams, belching formless words in their snoring. All these weary bodies, stewing in the vat of sleep, heavily digested their corrupted souls, soiled, wounded, avid and worn, crying mercy, or barking after game.

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This night delirium was becoming chronic in Marc's exhausted system. Poor, underfed, in an unhealthy lodging, abusing his strength, killing himself with work, defending himself against desire and drained by it, with fire in body and brain, struggling to master and produce order from his chaos, he fought his battle without a moment's truce, in a desert, out of sight of any human being. This murderous solitude delivered him over to attacks of burning fever, sapping brain and body. He could get no rest. He had abused the use of narcotics, and now, as soon as he fell asleep, he grew delirious. He perceived it, in gleams of consciousness, at the bottom of the pit, and he struggled desperately to get out. He awoke haggard, deadly weary, sick, and pursued by hallucinations of hearing. Everything sounded, the least thing he touched, the bar of the bed, the window, the pillow. His fever caught up imperceptible vibrations and amplified them beyond measure. He cried in anguish : "I am going mad." He struggled for several nights ; and in the day, prostrated by the reflux of the fever, he camped, helpless, on the battle-field. The last night he did not surrender ; he sat up in bed crying, "No !" tearing the enemy from his temples and neck with his nails.

The door opened. . . . A woman's hands seized his wrists. First stupefied, then angry, he tried to shake them off. But they held like a vice. He bent his head and bit them. His teeth sank in the flesh below the thumb. But the other hand that held him freed itself and hit him under the chin. He let go and found himself lying bewildered, his head thrown back on the pillow, and a young woman bending over him, with one knee on the edge of the bed to steady herself, holding his neck and saying in a crooning voice :

"Peace, my boy ! . . ."

She had brown eyes flecked with red. He stared, hypnotized, at the red flames in the iris. Then his stupefied glance fell on the hand near his face ; it was small and muscular, the skin golden-brown, with the pale line of a scar above the thumb. His feverish sense of smell perceived with mingled avidity and

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disgust the sulphurous odour of the skin. With a last burst of energy, he braced his body, to free himself, but he could not move, and lay very red in the face, his mouth open, gasping for air, like a fish out of water ; he cast a look of desperate appeal to the eyes with the reddish sparks, and fainted.

He was naked, his body lying across the dirty, untidy bed, with one leg hanging down on the floor.

The intruder passed her arms under the calf and thin loins of the young forsaken body, laid it back between the dirty sheets, examined it, and felt his forehead ; then she went back to her room to fetch her own pillow to raise his head ; and installed herself.

XXXV

She was of middle height, on the short side, frail in appearance but not in reality : thin but robust ; with a strong frame, a flat bosom, but wide hips, and muscular arms. She had a pale complexion, a wide countenance, a round, bony head and the face of a cat which will never be domesticated. Her eyes were steady—never troubled, even when trouble was upon her : there was stone in them. And hard was the curve of the wilful mouth, with the lower lip rather full and sometimes bitten, and shadowed by bitter memories and implacability. Her whole being exhaled an energy which seized, distressed and bound one to her. (It did not do to depend on it too far ! The energy was subject to eclipse. Her soul was periodic. . . .)

She was a Russian, a refugee in Paris. When she drifted there, two years previously, she was twenty. She was sixteen at the outbreak of the Revolution. Between seventeen and twenty she had lived through twenty lives—and how many deaths ? She had been swept along in the torrent of civil war. At eighteen, a child herself, she was a mother ; and in the Ukraine, at one of the assaults on Ekaternoslav, by a band of Makhno, she saw her child, her little boy, killed at her breast.

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At nineteen she was dragged along in the rout of Wrangel's army, and endured the abominable stages of the exodus through Turkey, the atrocious shame of the bargain made by Europe's hospitality with these human flocks, which the European reaction first made use of, pushed into the abyss, and then abandoned. She had known the hysterical hatred which thirsts to avenge and to inflict suffering in turn. She had known the shocks of frenzied revolt against cruelty which had made her execrate her own party as enemies. She had known the excesses of a body delirious and worn out with suffering. She had known hours of self-loathing and horror of the world ; hours of life vomited, and existence an impossibility. And she had known, inexplicably, complete oblivion of all she had seen and lived through—and the pitiless beginning again. Those terrible years were a bewildering whirlwind which had left no conscious trace. A clean sweep during the day ! The nights took their revenge. The past had become an hallucinated dream. She kicked it behind her. She said to herself : " Who was it ? " She had left behind her a trail of worn-out, soiled, murdered egos ! The new ego trampled them under foot. She spat on life, in vain. Life lived in her, and willed to live. She was a broad-hipped woman of twenty-two.

Her father held the chair of the History of Law at the University of Kazan—a highly respected representative of the old *intelligentsia*, which had been the stepping-stone of the Revolution, and which the Revolution had immediately outstripped, broken, and thrown into the worst reaction. In a few weeks the " intelligence " of Russia had leapt, like a demented compass, from Kerensky to Denikine, from revolutionary socialism to indelible collusion with the white counter revolution. They had had no time to get their breath and find their way : led astray by trouble and fury, blinded by the hurricane, they found themselves, with stupefaction, amongst those they looked upon as dirt beneath their feet ; but it was too late to free themselves, they were held fast by clots of blood ; even

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their tongues were tied. There was no other course than to sink into the quagmire, till they could see and feel no more, until they died. Fedor Volkoff had the good fortune to die at the first steps upon his way of the cross. (The cross is not for the just alone; the Christ had two men, who had made mistakes, for His companions on the gibbet.) Taken prisoner in trying to escape, he let himself be shot, without a word, forgiving neither his enemies, his friends, nor himself—with clenched teeth, cursing the world—darkness at last!

There was also a young brother between fourteen and fifteen, who adored Assia,¹ and shared her dreams of love and genius. At the first signal of assembly he went off with a band of mad young schoolboys, like himself, scarcely armed, to fight the Bolsheviks: they were all exterminated.

Assia followed on the road of the fugitives alone; every station marked by suffering and shame. More than once she was on the brink of suicide. She would have given up her soul, at every halt in the desperate flight, if the rage for life in the body of the young and the delirium it sends to their brain, had not covered her eyes with a red veil and set their spurs in her sides. She knew it. She willed it. She was suffocated with contempt and self-loathing. And since contempt must be swallowed to live, she gorged herself with it.

When at last she reached the western harbour—the sandy coast between the cliffs, where the wreckers were robbing the shipwrecked of their spars—Paris, the sounding seashore where the crabs thrown up by the ocean, were piled in a basket, devouring each other—she went to earth apart. At her first contact with the emigrants who had pitched their camp there at the outbreak of the Revolution, she had drawn back with cold repulsion: they were more foreign to her than the foreigner; they had lost all touch with life; they knew and understood nothing; and they went on perorating, arguing, and pronouncing, never perceiving that they were dead. Every time she saw them she felt this recoil of bewildered

¹ Anastassia.

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repulsion : "Dead . . . they are dead. . . . How can they not feel it ? . . ." They did feel it, in a desperate convulsion. Howling they called on God, the devil, the Tsar, and death—death for their own people, for others, for all humanity. Since Europe, since the world, would not save them, Europe and the world must die with them. And the lust of murder took possession of their brains, which were sinking into mystic madness, and the delirium of alcohol. Assia fled from them, she hated their babbling, their frenzy and their uselessness. She fled. She hated everything that reminded her of her past. She had plunged into the vast gulf of solitude, vastest in the heart of a great city. That city understood these Russians that it sheltered, no better than the Russians—than she herself—understood the city they despised, though they dwelt within it. Assia was apart from the living. She felt as though she belonged to a submerged world.

But she could not be submerged. She was of indestructible substance : the form alone can change. Like those submarine lives which adapt themselves to every pressure, she would have seen without eyes, and breathed without lungs. Nothing had power to dislodge her before her hour ; perhaps not even her own will.

She had held out for two years in almost complete isolation, with no resources, living by incredible chance means, some days on an apple stolen from a shop front, other days on nothing ; or when she had earned any money she would eat enough for half a week in a day, with the voracity of a young she-wolf ; she had the Cossack stomach which is tightened or distended according to whether one has anything to put into it or not. Though incapable of sustained effort, when she put her shoulder to the wheel she did the work of a whole gang ; no task could daunt her ; she had washed the flags of a café, and the spit ; she would stand on her legs of tempered steel for fourteen hours on end, doing housework; or carrying parcels for some shop, with the string sawing her fingers, from one end of Paris to the other, in shoes that let in water. And

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sometimes on such nights, when she got home, she did not go to bed, but sat reading till dawn on a sagging chair, in her clothes, that smelt like a wet dog, only taking off her shoes to cool her swollen feet on the tiled floor.

But sometimes she would drop the job, without excusing herself, and stay in bed all day, lying on her back, with her knees drawn up, day-dreaming, thinking of nothing, thinking of everything, with knitted brows, littering her crumpled sheets with cigarette ash. Then, at long intervals, she would get a sudden longing to mix with human beings. She would run about all night, without any definite goal, going into noisy places, cabarets, and dance halls, but in her own fashion, like a wild dog that sniffs, passes, and makes off again into the night. She had not the least coquetry, but a barbaric taste for colour. No man would ever have dreamed of smiling at it. Expression and movement gave her style. The apparition never passed unnoticed. Other women sneered, thought her ugly, pulled her to pieces. It was no use. They raged, for they knew perfectly well that there was not a man that was not thrilled by her passing. She could have lived by her body had she chosen. And no prejudices restrained the thin, ardent, famished body, which had nothing further to learn from life. Not once did she sell it. Nor even for nothing did she suffer her starving body to embrace another. She felt a dumb horror of the past and a savage rancour against all that her body had endured ; suffering, revolt, rage against her nature ; an unavowed need of expiation, the incurable wound in the side of a proud, healthy being, outraged by shameful life. The effect of such a wound is exactly the same as that of religious renunciation. The body punishes itself for the sufferings, and affronts it has endured. During those two years of dreadful solitude in Paris she constrained herself to ascetic chastity. The whole world could not have forced her to break her unformulated vow. Not even the pangs of starvation which tormented her for more than one night. On the contrary ! the more necessity squeezed her ribs, the more she hardened herself in her

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refusal. She was defended by 'the fierce pride of the vanquished ; which had but this one pledge to guard, to save her from touching the ground with her shoulders ; and she was sworn never to surrender it, even in the direst want—though she did not at all attach the same value to it as did the old morality. It was the sign of the last remnant of her liberty. In her suspicious dread lest it should be torn from her, this godless creature condemned herself to a parched and loveless desert, like some grim, obstinate monk of olden times.

She sought an *ersatz* for her famine in a strange intellectualism, intermittent, but by fits as tormenting as bodily hunger ; the satisfaction of the former relieved the latter. Then she would spend hours reading an uncut book before the door of a library in the arcades of the Odéon, swept by the icy winter blast ; and the warmly-clad salesmen, stamping their feet for warmth, let her alone ; they had got to know her, and she cheered their eyes. When she had read the book she scrupulously replaced it exactly where she had found it ; but she had a hairpin hidden in her sleeve, which she used as a paper-knife, when the salesman's back was turned. In this way she read whole books, treatises—certain pamphlets by Marx, whom in her three years flight from the Revolution, she had only known by furious clamour, as one of the seven heads of the Dragon. She spent more than one day taking in each chapter, page by page. She took good care not to steal the book, as she stole tomatoes and apples from greengrocers' stalls. The naked boy by whose bed she kept watch had no idea that it was she whose wrist he had seized on a certain day before the shop in rue Caumartin. She would not have had the slightest scruple about stealing a book she hungered after too, if it had not meant that she would lose the opportunity of returning to eat hay from the library hay-rack. She might very well have torn out a page or two from the book she was reading. She was one of those dangerous barbarians (all women belong, more or less, to that category) who, in their eagerness to appropriate some scrap of knowledge, would not hesitate to damage

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some precious book borrowed from a library. Well, why not? Books are made for me to eat. But since she had to make sure of her food for the morrow—the crumbs under the bookseller's table—prudence forced her to be as careful as himself of the books she handled. There was mutual trust between them.

Then she would go home to chew the cud of her hay, brain full and stomach empty. And she chewed the dry peel and pips of yesterday orange to cheat the pangs of hunger.

After two years of this heroic Lenten fare, varied by occasional chance meals, she was not dead; she had made herself a new life. She had the extraordinary elasticity of the Slavs, taught by the ages to suffer all things, and endure, and the miraculous power of resurrection of elect souls. (When I say "soul" I say "body": there are bodies that it would seem that age and death never touch: never a wound nor a stain: when they are worn out, the old sheath is dissolved and falls, and a new one is exposed to view). . . . The female soul is a

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Of the overwhelming experiences of life with which her mind and skin had come in contact, the skin had kept no taint, nor the mind a taste for nothingness. She was thoroughly healthy. Vainly did reason undermine everything : instinct unearthed the young future from the ruins. Her free, unrestrained critical faculty, and the savage health of her nature, which always made straight for the goal, without subterfuge, had gradually brought her closer to the conceptions of the new Russia ; at first without her being conscious of it, and then : "What do I care ? I go my way ; dogs have a right to the road too ! . . ." When she met someone who had come from Russia—an old school-friend, now a Communist, a typist at the Soviet Embassy—she suddenly recognized her own spiritual climate and country. The pride of the vanquished, holding out against defeat, refused to admit it. But whether she admitted it or not, the fact was there : this refugee saw and judged the refugees and the West, and the whole moral and social world, with the eyes of a Russian of revolutionary Russia. Her individualist pride, which had been increased by the solitude of exile, was the chief obstacle to her participation in it. The circumstances of her life had imprinted this indelible characteristic on her nature, which in its very depths would have aspired to mingle with those human masses in fusion. Hence her intermittent attacks of feverish and torpid nostalgia.

Then came the days I have mentioned, when she lay motionless in bed. And it was then that the invisible presence of her young neighbour had gradually filtered through the partition. In the inertia of her recumbent body the sense of hearing was sharpened ; like the antennæ of a giant insect it plunged through the cracks into Mare's room. It groped about, exploring it, till bit by bit, it reconstructed the lair and the animal. The latter—I mean Marc—deceived by the silence next door, betrayed himself, never suspecting that his every movement was felt : the blind, tenacious antennæ searched him from head to foot. Mare's fever did not soliloquise in dreams only. When he thought he was alone he kept no

watch upon its seething ; it sent forth passionate apostrophes, summits of phrases rising from the shadow like crests of waves in the sun, dialogues between Jacob and the Angel. The alert hearing plunged, like a seagull, through the sunlit foam of the mounting words, to the bottom of his heart. At first she fixed her attention only on the tone of the voice and the image of the mouth evoked by the voice as the odour evokes the fruit ; then from the mouth on all the rest of the body, which she tried to reconstruct in the dark. She smelled it out, not from attraction, but by female animal instinct and idleness. When she had finished her inspection, and by smell, touch and taste, had taken possession of the being next door, she had the wish, but with no haste, to verify *de visu* the individual she had constructed. She did not seek him ; but one evening she met him on the stairs ; she managed so that he did not see her in the dusk, but she saw him and, at a glance, she recognized the young man of rue Caumartin, the wolf-trap which had closed on her wrist, and then set her free. (At this moment, bending over the bed, where Marc lay burning with fever, she was looking at it, the beautiful young hand, with the long fingers that had held her in a vice, and she caressed it.) As to the rest, the real image did not seem to her very different from that which she had created. In such cases the real is so instantly substituted for the imaginary, that the mind is deceived into thinking that it has never seen otherwise.

But it is certain that from that moment she was more interested in her neighbour than ever ; and she followed his destiny with a more penetrating eye of hearing. She was struck by the seriousness of that young life, and her personal experience threw open to her the secret recesses of that inhuman solitude, like her own, the sufferings to which stoical pride forbade access. Now that she forced herself to keep awake part of the night, so as not to betray the secrets of her sleep, she followed those of the other's sleep and the rising tide of fever. She saw the unavoidable illness hovering like a hawk over the young body, circling round it in ever

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narrowing circles. She was waiting for the hour to intervene. The hour had come. She entered.

XXXVI

She had seen enough of sickness in the years of the horrible exodus, when she was swept along in the wake of the disbanded army ; she had tended often enough with haphazard means—in most abject misfortune—all the miseries and shames of wounded bodies, for any illness to find her unprepared. She decided that it was useless to call in a doctor ; she thought herself equal to the occasion. Marc could get well or die on her hands just as well as on those of the Faculty. Besides, judging him by herself, she thought the first thing was to spare him the hospital, and the hospital would be the first thing a doctor would order. . . . No ! when we die, we want to die alone. It is the last luxury.

She used powerful counter-irritants. She applied mustard plasters to his thighs and ice to his head. She watched, fed and washed him. No sick-room service disgusted her. The room was dirty and the air vitiated ; the light from the window on to the yard was blocked by the opposite wall, which was so close that by leaning out one could touch its leprous surface. The corner room where the Russian lodged had the benefit of an outlook on the street. Assia opened—forced—the inner door between the two rooms, and carried the patient into her own. He was taller than herself ; his long, thin legs and one hand dragged on the floor : he looked like a young Christ being carried to the tomb. Assia walked, supported on her pillars, her strong straddled thighs, her lower lip raised, her mouth tight shut, her brows knitted, and her severe eyes brooding over the body delivered to her arms. Something maternal stirred in her arid breast, from which the milk of human kindness had been torn away, with the mouth of the murdered child. The dried-up spring gushed forth again in heart-beats.

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She installed the unconscious man in her own bed. During the following night, when in a gleam of consciousness, he opened his eyes calling "Mother!" as one drowning, he saw that he was in a strange room and, bending over him, a beautiful, consoling mouth that said pityingly: "Yes, my boy . . ." and kissed his dry lips.

She cleaned out the other room. During the weeks preceding his illness, dirt had accumulated, and papers were strewn in every corner. She had time to sort them during her night watches. There were many letters among them. She read them. The man in her bed was her prey—for the moment; but only the present moment counts: past and future are nothing. All the spoils of the prisoner were part of the booty.

Many letters were from the "Mother". From her firm, flowing handwriting, that swept along with wide, rhythmic wings, like a bird sure of its way, Annette arose. Her passionate face outlined itself, in the dark room, in the depths of Assia's eyes. With every page turned by the invader's hand, the proud, tender outline grew clearer. Soon they stood face to face, taking each other's measure. They did not speak. Refolding the letters, Assia discerned the unknown woman. She valued her energy of love and combat: the vital force. She was competent to judge; she made no mistake about it. She valued the man lying in the next room more in that this woman had brought him forth.

From the mother's letters she reconstructed those of the son. She penetrated to the inmost recesses of that sensitive heart, ever at strife, to his fits of anger against the world, and himself; his fundamental purity and daily impurity, which made him rage with disgust, his weaknesses and defeats, which made him more akin to herself and more human. . . . And to the frank intimacy with that mother, whose virile understanding calmed him, and explained him to himself. She felt jealous of the woman—and, to her, it was the first sign that she loved the man.

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She perceived the sign. Nothing that her secret nature tried to hide ever escaped her. She shrugged her shoulders and got up. She stood beside the bed, considering the prostrate body, still struggling under restraint. In spite of all her care, the fever did not abate : it increased. A fatal issue threatened. Assia's hand caressed the burning brow, then slipping between the sheets tenderly pressed his feet. She reflected, glanced at the letters left lying on the table. She went out and telegraphed to his mother.

XXXVII

Annette was in England with Timon. When she received the brief, brutal, unsigned telegram, she swayed. Timon took it from her and read it—she had not the strength to speak ; and the hard man, who would have seen a nation die without flinching, showed an unexpected kindness. In her distraction Annette was flinging on her coat to rush to the nearest station, forgetting money, passport, luggage—everything. He held her back affectionately and made her sit down.

"Come, my child ! Don't lose your head ! Get ready, but calmly. You will be with your boy inside of four hours."

And he telephoned to the aerodrome that his aeroplane should be got ready at once. He went with Annette, in his car, to the aviation ground. On the way he reassured her with rough good-nature, which touched but did not convince her. At parting he was more moved than he cared to show. He said :

" You will save him. But when you have saved him, come back ! Shall I hold out till then ? "

His words frightened her, but the fear was far away. She was taken up with other thoughts. She said :

" Nothing threatens you. . . ."

He replied :

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" Myself. When I am alone with myself. You know very well. Would I have held out till to-day without you ? "

He saw that the woman's thoughts were far away. He said :

" Well, thank you ! You have done more than I could expect of you. And don't remember all the things in me that have soiled your eyes ! "

" I remember our friendship. That has always had clean hands."

" Well then, put yours in mine ! "

She pressed his hands. The engine of the aeroplane was roaring. She looked at the man with the athlete's face, that seemed battered with blows, marked by the brutal fingers of passions (some noble and some vile, not one that did not answer to the roll call), the bull forehead, the heavy eyes, with murky glance drinking in her image that they might be soaked in it like a sponge. She lifted her face to his and said :

" Let us kiss each other ! "

.
The door of the room was open. Assia did not worry about anyone coming in. There was nothing there to steal. And the neighbours were nothing to her. But when she saw the mother walk in (she recognized her at a glance), she was surprised ; she had not expected her so soon. No words were exchanged. Annette went straight to the bed, without stopping to take off her coat, and then threw herself upon her boy. But in the fashion known to mothers : the arms impulsive and the hands as gentle as a breeze caressing the burnt stalks in a field. The fevered limbs seemed to find relief in their touch. The sufferer's lips moved. He sighed. Annette carefully laid the burning head she had raised, back on the pillow. As she turned away to take off her things, she saw the other woman, who had stayed there, determined not to yield up her place. Brief glances crossed, straight and keen. Annette said :

" Did you send me the telegram, madame ? "

Assia said, without moving her head :

" I did."

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Annette held out her hand ; Assia took it. There was no warmth in their handclasp. They were signing the compact. Annette went into the next room, inviting Assia to follow her with a gesture, and she said :

" Tell me about it ! "

A mother has natural rights. But they clashed with those that Assia had arrogated to herself. And her instinct reared against the involuntarily imperious voice and gesture. For a few seconds there was a silent encounter of wills between the two women. They were scarcely conscious of it, but their strength was tense, like a horse under the hand that pulls at the reins. Then the horse yielded. Assia spoke. She briefly related the course of the illness. She said nothing about the relations that might or might not exist between herself and Marc : but she took a secret pleasure in letting the other know that it was her bed in which her son lay asleep. Annette's quick eye had taken in the two rooms while Assia was speaking. She had no doubt whatever that this woman was Marc's mistress. To her unprejudiced mind, from that moment Assia was a stranger no longer. Her attitude softened. Assia did not understand the reason. She remained hard and cold before the grave eyes that had grown softer.

The two women did not think of trying to understand each other. There was this man to save. They allied themselves in his defence. They pooled their experience. Annette was struck by the maturity of Assia's and the sureness with which she put it into practice. The young woman did what was necessary with cool prompt precision, without hesitation. Not one false move, nor one too many. In the mother's presence she behaved as though she were alone, performing the most private offices without embarrassment, handling the pitiful helpless body as on a hospital bed the suffering flesh is the property of the nurse. Annette, shocked and captivated, observed this apparent inhumanity, and recognized its efficacious rightness. Annette herself resigned the lead, obeying with docility when the other woman said curtly :

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"Come! Support this leg! Raise the loins! Don't you see? . . ."

Though she herself was used to nursing—what woman in Europe did not learn during the War?—her hands betrayed her emotion as she touched her son's body. She admired the calm precision of Assia's movements. This calmness surprised her all the more that she had immediately read the violence and passions written in that face; before Assia had definitely recognized and accepted it Annette knew, by passing flashes on that face, that this woman had taken possession of her son.

They shared the watches between them. Each in turn was on duty by Marc's bedside, and then took her ration of rest. Assia, who had been up several nights, slept like a log. Annette had time for thought as she listened to the fevered breathing of the two—one irregular and jerky; the other quick and heavy, as if making haste to eat its share. And actually, at the appointed hour of her watch, Assia woke up suddenly and returned to her post at Marc's bedside, forcing Annette to take her place on the bed she had just left, still warm from her hallucinated sleep.

XXXVIII

When Marc recovered consciousness, after several anxious days, his still bewildered glance grew clear when it fell upon the tender face of his mother. He smiled at her; and this gave her delight. But the seeking glance met, over Annette's shoulder, the puckered brow and red-flecked eyes of Assia, and stopped, surprised, groping, questioning, trying to understand; and returned to the mother's eyes, that read the question. Assia, standing behind her, had not spoken. . . . So they did not know each other? She watched in silence. Assia's jealous reserve made it impossible to question her. She continued to move Marc on his pillow, and manage him,

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as though she had rights over him. Marc submitted silently, not daring to ask questions, fascinated by this presence, which he could not explain, seeking the key of the enigma in the few conscious moments of his nights of fever. He had a strange fear that if he asked a question the apparition would vanish. After fruitless efforts, his mind picked up the scent. A light shone in the darkness. But he wanted to make sure, and his mother's presence hindered him from verifying it. At last he took advantage of a moment when she was further off, and Assia was bending over him, to whisper :

" You are my next door neighbour ? "

She said :

" You come from next door. You are in my room."

He had not noticed it. His eyes travelled round the room. The warm blood rushed to his head, which was still weak, and reddened his brow. Assia laid her firm hand upon it :

" Come now ! Keep still ! You can think another day."

And, still bending over him as if to shake up the pillows, she explained matters in a few curt words that admitted no reply :

" There was no air in that room. I carried you in here. Now shut up ! . . . There is nothing more to think over."

She spoke brusquely, under her breath, but Annette heard the imperious *tu* that kept her son nailed to the pillow in fascinated amazement. And when Assia, turning around, met the other woman's glance, she read it. What did she care ! She had nothing to hide. But she did not care to speak. And Annette, respecting her silence, waited until the stranger should choose to say more.

So they remained, all three, watching each other, without explaining themselves. Marc slowly studied the body that was slowly enveloping him with an inexplicable charm. Each feature, separately, was strange to him, and seemed hostile ; the whole was like an inextricable net tightening over his will, mesh by mesh. It irritated him, he kept on trying to discover the reason for it ; he added up his criticisms and the total always differed from the sum of units. And he found that

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he would not have wished to change anything or to efface a single detail. For this woman was not like others who are loved for a mouth, a nose, a bosom—piecemeal. She existed, and was loved or hated for the whole, the unique animal, with no counterpart, which she was, and which imposed itself by force of being. And every detail of her, beautiful or ugly—perhaps the ugly especially—was the more binding in that it was her mark, designating her . . . “ You . . . and none other. . . .”

By tacit agreement he spoke to her directly as little as possible, and he never risked addressing her as *tu*, as she continued to address him, with insolent familiarity—it seemed like a note of defiance. They made use of Annette as a channel of communication. Both had good ears to overhear from one room to the other, what each one said when alone with the mother. But as Assia knew this, she set a guard upon herself, and eluded Annette’s patient efforts to get to know her. She was very ingenious in escaping, but without rudeness; for she was won by Annette’s cordiality and sincere eyes. She disengaged herself by supple turns, which opened perspectives for a moment; but they vanished before they could be explored, and only increased the uncertainty. But the disappointment of the young listener was made up for by the pleasure he derived from the melodious, rhythmic voice. It was more beautiful and full of savour than the most beautiful body. He enjoyed it, with closed eyes, as though on his lips and under his hands. It was warm and charged with voluptuousness. Then, when she came back to his bedside, this woman who called him *tu* and treated him roughly, with gentle hands that set him on fire, he turned his back to her, to escape the temptation to force open her obstinate mouth and enter into it.

When he was alone with his mother he was less able to dissimulate. Convalescence and desire, which rose with the sap in the young limbs, laid him naively open to her eyes. Perhaps, secretly, he was not sorry that the eyes of the unknown woman could plunge in, over his mother’s shoulder, though he seemed

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to be speaking to her alone. Annette was not taken in. Her son's overflowing confidences were only half for her. . . . "Young artful! There! I kiss you half for her and half for myself. But that's not what you want. . . ."

Marc talked about himself, himself, and himself. . . . He was not boasting. He told the good and the bad about himself. But he spoke with bitter and insatiable passion. And it is cheating to be passionate in speaking of oneself; be it for or against; it is to take all the air and light. It is to eat up the other, or say to the other: "Eat me!"—which is the same thing. Marc, though he would not, or could not, admit it, was eagerly and naively offering himself to the obstinately closed mouth of the stranger: "Open! Eat!" And as that mouth was famished, it did not miss a morsel.

She chewed with her strong teeth this burning, violent, bitter, tender mind, like a young shoot, still green. It was cool to the mouth, and wholesome. In all this budding life, disordered and contradictory, which he displayed and confessed with a headlong sincerity that moved the two women, and made them smile ("Poor little puppy"), there was nothing spoiled, only the mud of the gutter on his coat ("Come here and let me wash you! . . ."); but the body remained quite new, like that of a new-born babe. Convalescence contributed to this, for convalescence is a new birth. . . . Assia, making no sign, thrilled silently in the next room. Her hands itched with longing to touch that impudent young body. She loved the bold, candid boy's sincerity, like a mountain torrent, with its contradictory twists and turns. Assia herself lived perpetually in these contradictions of thought and—still more—of opposing instincts which fight for possession of the being and expose it to the most unfortunate adventures. But she was used to this state; she made the best of it: it was her nature. Marc persisted in trying to escape from it, and bruised himself against the walls. Assia's bitter indifference, born of contempt for herself, and life whose mad events had stamped her with that characteristic, was in love with the tragic

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seriousness with which the boy took the game. She wanted to rock him against her breast, the great silly, violent and true to the pitch of absurdity, whom one loved for his absurdity.

She was akin to him by their common mental isolation, their detachment from their environment the error and vanity of which they had seen through. Even as she had destroyed the bridge between herself and all her camp of Russian refugees, yet was unable to pass to the other camp of those who had killed her people, hunted and outraged her, and whom she hated with all the violence of her trampled pride. So Marc rejected with fury all the movements of his own French generation, all that youth, whose incoherence, frivolity, selfishness, opportunism, simple cynical or hypocritical ; lies of art, thought, action, and politics ; false "intellectualism", false "realism", false "Europeanism", all the masks and lies of servility—"Intelligence Service!"—of impotence and interestedness, he denounced and laid bare.

He was atrociously unjust ; and it would have been useless to convince him of it ; he knew it, he meant to be ; he had suffered too much from it all, he had shared in it ; he needed to avenge himself, to tear his skin free from its glue. Annette did not try to argue. She said :

"It is the bad blood escaping ; relieve your feelings! . . . Cut your teeth ! Cut them on me if it does you good ! It will not be the first time that you have bitten my breast."

Assia would not have refused to let him bite hers. The cruel young teeth pleased her ; they could hate and love—like her own. Marc's injustice, which she was capable of recognizing, was more akin and warmly welcome to her than the balancing tricks of those monkeys on the tight-rope, who preach money and success. A Frenchman who tore the veils of hypocrisy from his mother France—no ! not mother, stepmother ! with such vengeful indecency was no such common animal. No doubt the French have always boasted —other nations likewise—that they were the only ones who accused each other, while other nations glorified themselves.

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But it is only—with other nations likewise—a roundabout way of glorifying themselves by attributing to themselves the dangerous privilege of knowing how to criticize themselves. And their criticism does not go very far. They swing the thurible whilst they are at it, and come forth agreeably perfumed, for they always except themselves from their censures. Marc did not except himself in the least ; he fiercely scourged his compatriots on his own back. Assia, who like all Slavs, practised auto-analysis, with that sharp voluptuousness that lifts the ultimate veils (confession is a mania which develops the psychological at the expense of the moral sense, in the most gifted of that nation), appreciated like a connoisseur this self-exposure, bold scrutiny, and naked soul. She was not without suspicion that it was bared for her benefit. And that was true. An obscure animal instinct drove Marc to let himself be seen and smelt at by her whom he desired. . . . “ I show myself naked. You, show yourself ! . . . ”

She heard the call. She was stirred by warm gusts of longing to answer it, to strip herself and cry : “ Look ! ”

She knew him more thoroughly than he knew her. Nothing of him was hidden from her. Every detail of his body was impressed upon her eyes. And now that renewed life was rising in his body, it flowed into the duplicate her eyes had taken. The impress burned. The prisoner was taking in his turn. He was growing troublesome.

The man and the woman—the two children—watched each other with sidelong glances that caught every movement. And now silently (Marc had grown silent, waiting the answer to his call) they heard desire rising within them. The sharpened hearing of the convalescent heard it rising in the woman. But as the latter felt it she grew harder and more reserved.

And one night the man felt certain that the woman would betray her secret. She hovered round him, she drew near, then moved away—dusk was creeping into the room. Annette went out, they were alone—the woman hesitated, made up her mind, came suddenly, bent over him as often before, to

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re-arrange the sheets ; but this time he was sure that her arms would go round him, that her mouth would swoop like a hawk, and with loins tense and bristling flesh, he waited, ready to bite. . . .

With a sudden movement she drew herself up, backed to the wall, leant against it, and said coldly :

" You are cured. It is time we each went back to our own room."

He was astounded. Struck dumb with amazement. Then anger restored speech. He flung his legs out of bed and said, in a choking voice :

" This very instant."

She shrugged her shoulder without moving.

" To-morrow will do."

" Why wait ? "

She made no move to stop him. He was already walking across the room dragging the sheets after him, catching his bare feet in them in his rage. Annette came back. She was surprised. Marc said :

" It is settled."

Assia's impenetrable silence acquiesced. Annette did not insist. She was quick at reading. She said :

" Very well ! The moving won't take long. We have only to change the sheets."

" Why change them ? " said Assia. " These sheets, or those. . . . We are past being so particular."

In his cold rage Marc was grateful to her. He had already gone into the next room. Then he reflected that this cold indifference was even more insulting. And he turned his back to the company.

Annette, smiling at the two sulkers, said to Assia, who still leant, frowning, against the wall :

" My child, we have abused your hospitality disgracefully. Forgive us ! I can never love you enough for all you have done for my son."

Assia growled :

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"I've done nothing. . . ."

(She was touched to the heart by that voice—by two words.)

"You have saved him," said Annette. She held out her arms. Assia threw herself into them and buried her forehead in the mother's bosom. It was impossible to raise the obstinate head. Annette could only kiss her hair.

"Now," she said, "let us make our plans ! Now that great boy is able to go out, I think I'd better get him a healthier lodging."

"I think so too," said Assia.

Marc growled :

"There's plenty of time ! "

"Why wait ?" said Assia with pursed lips.

Marc, in a fury, noticed that she retorted in the very words he had used himself.

"Very well !" he said ; "to-morrow then ! "

"Give me time to find a room !" said Annette.

"It's found," said Assia. "I know of a room vacant in rue de Chatillon which an acquaintance of mine has had to leave within the last few days. I'll show it to you, if you like."

"We'll see about it to-morrow," said Annette.

She held out her hand to Assia, who withdrew into her own room and shut the door. Annette cast an ironical glance of pity at her son, and said good night to him, taking care not to notice his bad temper. She went back to the room which she had taken in the same hotel, two floors below.

Marc was left alone. He had time to brood over his vexation ; and even to lose all pride and feel nothing but sorrow. But desire remained. It changed into a raging thirst. The spring was there, close at hand. Only a wall separated him from it. A wall of rubbish, a wall of obscure misunderstanding. But to-morrow it would be a whole town. He did not give himself time to think. His hand knocked at the wall. He regretted it the next moment ; he wanted to call out : "Don't come !" He was saved the trouble. She did not come. All was still on the other side of the wall. Marc gnawed at his

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fists, sheepish and indignant. He waited. . . . Night drew on. Night had come. Above the roofs the shrill clock of the Sorbonne struck eleven, struck midnight, struck one. Marc fretted himself, his face to the wall, huddled feverishly between his sheets, his knees drawn up, like a dog curled round. . . . What did he want? The brutal embrace? No. He could not have expressed what he wanted. The woman, all that she bore in her bosom, all that she was hiding; all that he could surmise of her life, the good and the bad of her mind. He wanted it all. He wanted that stream to mingle with his. What rolled in its waters? He did not know. He wanted those waters. He wanted all. . . . And to have it the brutal embrace was necessary. It was the only way. But all the boy's blood would have risen in revolt had one told him that that was what he wanted. He would have cried "No!", and he would have been sincere. As the stream that rushes to the river. He hastened not to her. He was hastening to the sea. And he needed that transfusion of blood his affluent, not to die in the sands before reaching it. Marc's mouth would fain drink Assia's blood. Suddenly that mouth, with its dry lips, was laid close to the wall: it whispered:

"Assia!"

The keenest ear could not have heard it. A few minutes passed. He repeated:

"Assia!"

louder. . . . Dead silence. Marc hated. Hated till his breath failed him. He fell back on his bed, his hands clutching his neck, trying to loosen the invisible knot that was strangling him. . . . Then the air came back, flowed in. Even before he heard, he had seen. . . . The door opened; the woman came in.

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Ever since she had left the other room, she had been crouching there on her bed, silent and motionless. She had heard

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everything, from the first tap on the wall, which had made her flare with anger, to the first inaudible whisper, which had made her faint with sweetness. She was in turn, by fits and starts, and almost at the same time, fire and ice, a spurt of burning blood jetting forth and driven back by a piston—and complete apathy. . . . She was determined not to move. . . . But why? Why should she not take this man if she wanted him? She had taken others. . . . But this one, no! She was caught. And she did not wish to be caught again. She did not want to be recaptured by illusion. . . . And as she really loved this time—she refused to admit it—she was not concerned for herself alone, but for him, and the harm she might do him. For she knew—she consented to admit this—that she was not inoffensive. He who took her would take the soul with the body, the tortured, harassed, famished soul, the wayworn, burning feet, which would march on till her last breath—would take the past and the future. . . . It was a heavy burden for the loins of the feverish boy, whom she seemed to see and embrace in the dark! She felt the supple spine. She felt it under her hands, bent to breaking point. . . . She put it aside, but her hand went back to it. She could not detach herself from it. By dint of saying: “No!”, pushing it aside, and seeking it again, her hands, arms and knees carried her away. She found herself standing barefoot on the threshold of the other room, indignant, struggling against the violence that was being done her, hating him who hated her, ready to cry out in hostile tone: “What do you want with me? . . .” She ran to him and fell against him.

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✓ The knot of their relaxed bodies was now loosed. But their spirits were still united. Clasping each other, they felt the same blood beating within them, and its calm

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warmth, its golden stream, flowing into their limbs! And Marc, intoxicated with his capture, said, laughing and clasping her :

" I've got you, I've got you ! . . . You're mine."

And Assia, silent, thought :

" I am not yours. I am not my own, nor anybody's."

But she held him tight in her arms. . . . The slender spine, the soft loins. . . . It seemed to her that she could break them. . . . In a flood of tenderness, she bent down impetuously and covered them with kisses.

Her young companion sighed, passing his long trembling fingers over the ardent face that caught at them with voracious lips. And in a frenzy of gratitude he talked and talked, twittering like a bird, he revealed himself in simple incoherent words ; he laid bare the depths of his heart ; candidly he gave up his solitude, the ultimate secret of his being and destiny, he committed them to the hands of this unknown woman, who listened with her face buried in the curve of his waist. She listened, full of tenderness, with bitterness and irony. He gave himself, supposing that he knew her ; he knew nothing about her, nothing of the scars and indelible stains which the past had left upon her ; nothing of the soul's deposit at the bottom of the vessel, nothing of the bottom. . . . If he could have heard he would have answered :

" I know better than you do what lies in the depths of you. Though I make out no reckoning of the days and nights that have passed over your surface, I have touched the bottom." Who could have told which of the two was right ? Love's spur goes beyond consciousness. But it is true that he is blind. He touches and holds, but he cannot tell what he holds ; he sees nothing.

Yet he holds. . . . When the yellow windows of the room showed, even yellower than usual—it was raining—Assia bent over her young companion, who had fallen asleep at last, in the morning. She had not closed her eyes. She looked at his tired cheeks, his happy mouth, his supple, abandoned body,

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and their legs were intertwined ; she could not disengage herself : she thought :

" What is mine ? What is his ? We are mingled now. . . . "

And she longed to lie down again, in lassitude and voluptuousness. . . . But she stiffened herself. She said :

" No ! I must not ! What has he to do with me ? And I, what have I to do with him ? Let each take back what is his own ! "

She tore herself away. It was hard. He opened his eyes. She all but weakened at his look. She did herself violence. She closed his eyes with her mouth. She said :

" Sleep. . . I must go out for a little while ; but I am not leaving you ; I take you with me, and leave myself here. . . . "

He fell asleep again, too exhausted to reply. She escaped. She spoke truly : she carried away a piece of him encrusted in the depths of her heart. It was too late to escape. She went and knocked at Annette's door. She said :

" I told you of a vacant room. I will show it to you. Let us go out together."

Annette, already up and dressed, was packing her trunk as if about to start on a journey. She turned to Assia. A look was enough to make her hear the great warm winds blowing in her bosom—not yesterday's icy blast :—it was tempest still, but the hurricane had changed its quarter. She said : " Let's go ! " Assia did not hear the storm of sorrow in the other woman's breast. Her burning eyes read a telegram open on the table :

" Timon dead."

The words, scarcely read, were forgotten. What was it to her ? . . . They went out.

At first they merely exchanged a few casual remarks about the falling rain. They were silent as they went through the Luxembourg, between the two iron gates of rue de l'Abbé-de-l'Epée and rue Vavin. The rain was drizzling on the green

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lawns. Assia stopped abruptly, took a chair and said to Annette :

" Sit down ! I want to talk to you."

The fine, persistent, penetrating rain came down. There was nobody about. They were at the foot of the shepherdess and her kid, sculptured in stone. Annette did not protest. She sat down on the dripping chair. Assia sat down beside her. Annette had on a mackintosh, Assia merely a very threadbare red shawl, which she did not even trouble to wrap round her shoulders ; her open-necked dress of grey wool and cotton mixture, drank in the wet. Annette leaned towards her, to share her umbrella with her. Assia said :

" Don't bother about me ! I'm used to this sort of thing ! So is this dress. . . ."

Nevertheless Annette continued to shelter her. And as Assia spoke the two women, elbow to elbow, equally engrossed in the narrative, drew closer together till their heads were touching.

Assia had begun *ex abrupto* :

" For five years I have rolled in all the gutters of Europe. I am not afraid of another shower-bath. I know the taste of mud, the taste of soot in your rain ! The water in great cities doesn't wash, it dirties. But I am past trying to protect my ermine. There is not a spot on it that hasn't dragged. It has collected the odour of all the flocks. Can you smell it ? (She put the shawl to Annette's nose. . . .) It has rolled in the sticky mud of the Ukraine, and in the age-long filth of Constantinople and its horrible markets before it came here to pick up the dust of your dreadful indifference. . . ."

" Mine ? " murmured Annette.

" Your West."

" Nothing is mine," said Annette, " but myself."

" You are lucky ! " said Assia. " That is more than I have ever had. . . . Listen ! I must speak. . . . If what I have to say disgusts or bores you, you can go away. . . . I am not detaining you. I detain nobody. . . . But try ! . . ."

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Annette was silent, observing the profile of the young woman with the salient forehead who, holding her head up under the rain, with knitted brows and hard eyes staring straight ahead, saw nothing before her, but everything within, as she went down into the prison of her memories.

" You are more than twice my age," said Assia, " but I am the elder of the two. I have lived through everything."

" I am a mother," said Annette gently.

" I was," said Assia in a hoarse voice.

Annette started. She murmured cautiously :

" You have lost him ? "

" They killed him in my arms."

Annette stifled a cry. Assia was staring at a stain on the corner of her shawl.

" There ! Look ! . . . The butchers ! . . . They bled him like a lamb. . . ."

Bereft of words, Annette instinctively laid her hand on Assia's shoulder :

" My poor child. . . ."

Assia jerked away her shoulder and said curtly :

" Don't ! . . . We need not bewail ourselves ! Perhaps I would have done what they did."

Annette cried :

" No ! "

" I wanted to," Assia continued. " I had sworn, afterwards, that I would kill every child of theirs that fell into my hands. . . . But I couldn't do it. . . . And when I saw the man who, to avenge me ! . . . I nearly killed him."

She shut her mouth. For a few minutes nothing was heard but the fine rain, falling, falling, and dripping.

Annette laid her hand on Assia's knee.

" Go on ! "

" Why did you interrupt me ? "

She continued :

" I was not born for such times. I have had to get used to them. The times came. I was raped. I am not the only one.

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There are thousands of us out there whom they came and took in our maiden beds and bled. . . . It will be the turn of your Western girls some day. . . . All the blood of our hearts and our illusions was shed. Many died. But I—I lived. Why? I don't know. Do you know? . . . If anyone had told me, in my agony, that I should be living still to-day, I would have spat out my soul in his face. I would have cried—No! And I lived! And I am living! . . . And I want to live. . . . Isn't it terrible? What is required of us? Who wants us—when we—we do not want ourselves?"

"Our fate," said Annette. "The fate of souls who have a long way to go. I know it. The fate of women who have no right to reach death till they have passed through the triple sacrament of love, despair and shame. Go on!"

Assia spoke of her warm, languid childhood in the nest of quiet family life. That overwhelming sweetness of life which so often precedes the brutal blow of the end. . . . Goodness, weakness, dissolution, the aroma of marsh lilies. . . . Sweet outpouring of sincere love, which costs nothing, for an undefined Humanity and of sensual indifference caressing itself in silence, while the worm of the mind gnaws the ripe fruit on the branch, which is about to fall. They had not strength enough for unkindness. The mere thought of cruelty would have thrown them into convulsions. They were content in the heavy, soft, sickening atmosphere of fine apples rotting in the store-room. They called themselves Tolstoyans, and their blasé taste enjoyed Scriabine and the elastic capers of the androgynous Nijinsky. But they accepted, as spice, the annunciations of Stravinsky. . . . Of course there was a war on. It had begun *over there*. . . . *Over there* was so far off! Like a piece of scenery at the back of the stage. That, too, was sp. . . . And the little maid of fifteen looked at the ~~bedding~~ ver of her breasts and listened, in her bush, to the bird of love singing his song. . . . The selfish pastoral went on. In the country, to which her family had withdrawn, life was free from burning and privation. In the big, untidy

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garden full of raspberries, currants, and weeds, the two children, brother and sister, confided their experiences and hopes to each other as they crunched sunflower seeds. They tasted the *pirojki* and the poets, Blok and Balmont, to nausea. They amused themselves with æstheticism seasoned with a few pinches of theosophy, and cultivated a merely verbal *narod-nikism*¹ of vague pity and soft idyllic faith in the poor, ignorant, unwashed people, rich in hidden wisdom and goodness, sleeping like a sheet of water under the scum. The official idealism, which was their father's religion, trusted in kind Nature, and Human Progress moving without jolts upon its benevolent way, and in the wisdom of events, even of war and defeat, to bring about, without excessive effort, the Golden Age; the holy Russia of liberal reason and the enlightened bourgeois heart: Korolenko, the good genius, the dream president of the ideal Republic of the future. . . . On the very eve of the great assault on Petrograd, in October, they did not believe in the gravity of the danger; they were so sure of their strength that they had not even taken precautions to defend themselves. They awoke vanquished, before they had fought. . . . ✓The face of the world was changed. The country was shaken from end to end as by the shock of an earthquake. Everything was falling to ruins. And the tremendous displacement of the atmosphere scattered the shreds of millions of nests. Flights of maddened birds circled blindly and fell to earth. People met each other fleeing in the wake of the armies. And between one day and the morrow all the veils of life, to the last covering, were torn away. They discovered, with stupor, the heaped-up rancour and hatred congealed in the heart of the people, but yesterday so kindly and long-suffering. They saw the beast, its mad eyes, its bloody mouth, its murderous breath, and its lust. . . . A servant whom they trusted, who had seen the children grow up, with humble and

¹ *Narodnichestvo* was the great pre-revolutionary movement of the Russian intellectuals "going to the people". (*Narod* = people, "Populism".)

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familiar solicitude, suddenly revealed himself one day, brutally threatening, and tried to rape the young girl. . . . Then came flight among the Kerenskysts, mixed with the Whites. And the eruption of the same instincts among them, in their own camp. And suddenly the last line of defence, the donjon, was invaded; by the eruption of the same madness in the young girl. The beast breathed in your face. And you became like it. . . .

"And I was! And (most terrible of all) I became like it quite easily. At once. . . . Does it mean that I always was, and that all the mask of culture sticking to our skins was a burden to us, and that our nails itched to tear it off? . . . My father looked at me with dismay . . . the old cannot change their skin. . . . His presence was the last restraint upon me. It was not much. I was pregnant when he died. Luckily for him, he died before it was visible. . . . I buried my former self with him. I left her with him to rot behind me on the road. I lost her, I lost her very name, and the sense of my identity. For two years I was nothing but an anonymous creature, a mad woman carried along with the furious gallop of the herd . . . even now, to-day, this instant, my eyes are full of its dust. What have I seen? What have I done? What have I endured?"

"Stop, poor soul!" said Annette, her hand pressing Assia's knee. "Do not rake it up!"

"I will," said Assia, "I will not spare myself. I've told you, if it's too stifling for your nostrils, go away!"

She did not spare Annette. She did not spare herself. She told of the dreadful exodus, the blind spiral descent, with leaps and falls, to the bottom of the circle. She spared herself no humiliation. She showed neither sorrow nor shame. She spoke with swift, curt precision, her head high, her eyes hard: the rain doing duty for tears ran down her nose. Annette held her breath, enthralled, admiring the sober power of the narrative, so pitiless, firm and closely knit, without repentance (either in the spiritual or the aesthetic sense), which projected

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in the aquarium of this drenched April morning, the film of her hallucinated career. So fascinated by the magic of the pictures that she never thought of estimating their moral quality ; she followed the infernal chase with beating heart, not knowing whether the flat profile on which her eyes were fixed was that of the Scythian Diana or the quarry. While her umbrella, absently tilted, dripped on to her shoulder.

A keeper of the Luxembourg garden passed and stared at the two women, who never noticed him ; he turned back when he had passed them, considered their fixed attitude, jerked his chin, and walked on. There are so many lunatics about ! One is used to them in Paris. . . .

Assia was now telling the story of the exile with all its shame and insults, the degrading servile work which had completely broken so many still, proud souls among the emigrants, or had driven them to frenzy—but which had stimulated her soul and stirred it to a savage reaction of pride and contempt. She told of the grim solitude in which she had immured herself, and the revelation which had come to her during that terrible time when she had voluntarily cut herself off from the life of men, the exultant affirmation of her lonely and lost ego, the incomprehensible power of that unknown ego which hurled defiance at the world and held out against it—those two years of fierce struggle, in which she had succeeded in defending herself not against others only, but against her own pitfalls, her waves from the depths. Annette guessed, better than Assia told, that incredible energy, but with no compass and no centre, desperately persisting, alone, in the vain search for that centre : seeking, ever seeking, its direction and meaning amidst the exigencies and sordid humiliations of daily servile work, and the pangs of hunger which she preferred to the mess of pottage that might have been offered her as the price of her subjection to a party, or a man. That hard pride, that pure diamond and that fury of independence that had saved her, Annette perceived them at once, with a practised eye, amidst the chaos of this woman's soul which a cataclysm had laid waste ; and

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she could see in the alluvium the veins of moral and spiritual strength beneath the ruins of a world. She saw them better than Assia who, in the urge of her impetuous confession, had no mercy on herself. Assia talked and talked, and the other listened and listened and thought. For how long? . . . Was it an hour, or more? In the pauses between two sentences the chiming of the clock of the *petit lycée* fell like a pinch of shot in the bowl of a scale. . . . Assia stopped, lost the thread, passed her hand over her forehead. . . . Emerging from the abyss she could not realize why she was in it, why she had told all this. She said rudely:

"What are you doing there, listening to me?"

Annette was spared the trouble of answering. Memory rose again. Assia said:

"I had not set foot in all this for two years. What possessed me this morning? What have I done?"

She paused; she mechanically wrung her dripping hair, unconcerned that the streams were running down her back. And she said:

"Ah! . . . There you are. . . . Now you know who I am. Take back your son, and take him away!"

"That's settled," said Annette. "We are looking for a room for him."

"But immediately! Let him never see me again, nor I him!"

"Where is the danger?"

"I love him."

"And does he love you?"

Assia shrugged her shoulder:

"If I love I am loved."

"What can I do then if he loves you?"

"You can do much. You are the only person who has power over him. I know him. I know you. I know the bond between you. Stronger and more intimate than is usual between mother and son."

"How do you know?"

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"I have read your letters."

Annette gasped.

Assia never even thought of excusing herself.

"I have left it too long. I tried to send him away last night. It was too late. The harm is done now."

"The harm?"

"He would say: the good. . . . So should I if I followed my inclination, if I did not know what I am, and what I see ahead. . . . Come, take him away while there's time, and be quick about it! I can't answer for to-morrow. . . . I would take him from you and be his evil fate. I don't want to be that. But it's inevitable."

Annette asked:

"And you?"

"Me? What about me?"

"What is for your good, or your hurt?"

"What on earth can that matter to you?"

"I ask for an answer."

"It's of no importance."

"You told me that you loved him."

"Of course! Why should I tell you about it, otherwise?"

"Are you in the habit of driving those you love away from you?"

"I have never loved anyone before. . . . Yes, considering how I have given myself away to you, you may well shrug your shoulders. I shrug mine too. . . . And that's enough! It has nothing to do with the question. It doesn't count for you."

"That remains to be seen," said Annette.

She looked at Assia drenched with the rain. Her dress had soaked up the water like a sponge. Her breasts showed through the stuff which clung to her body. She looked as though she was in a bath-wrap after a dive. There was not a tinge of colour in her cheeks. She sat with clenched teeth, deathly pale, chilled to the bone. Annette got up:

"Come, let's go back. We can go on talking in my room."

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She put her mackintosh, forcibly, over Assia's shoulders and led her away. She tried to resist, but she had expended so much energy that she was exhausted.

Her determination to break with Marc must not be looked upon as due to disinterested love, bent on saving Marc from herself. The love of an Assia, however ardent, can never be disinterested. She did really want (she was not lying!) to save him. And she was amazed at her own renunciation: it was treason to love! . . . But, above all, she wanted to save herself. It was inexplicable to her that she should have let herself be caught by passion again, when she had sworn to keep clear for ever of the wheel which had crushed her. Her past encounters with passion had inspired her with a fear and horror of that servitude which amounted to hatred. But would these have been so violent if she had been safe from its lure? She was tempted to fall into it again. She felt the danger of the abyss and its invincible attraction. Marc was the abyss. He had completely captured her: her whole body which burned like a torch—all her heart, which consumed itself for the dear boy, by tenderness, by the pity he inspired, by a secret maternity, by a combination of the superiority that dominates, and the inferiority that appeals for protection. And even now she had not strength enough to detach herself from him unaided after last night. She had just enough to appeal to Annette to detach her. But she was broken by the effort. Annette took her back to the hotel, holding her tightly by the arm. On the way Assia made another effort. She stopped, stopped in the middle of the crowded boulevard. She cried angrily:

“Relieve me of your son! Take him away!”

“That won't be much use,” said Annette, “if you come and fetch him back!”

“That's your business! See that I can't get at him!”

Annette felt the quiver of Assia's armpit under her hand, and the shivering of the thigh against her own. Then the tension of the nerves relaxed. She had nothing but a heavy, docile, wet bundle to drag along under her arm. They went

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in. Annette told Assia to go and change her clothes. But Assia had left the key in her door, locked on the inside. She could not get in without passing through Marc's room ; and she was afraid to let him see her in that state. Annette took her to her own room, and went herself to fetch Assia's clothes. Assia tried to prevent her ; Annette was a little doubtful as to whether what she was going to fetch existed. She went through her son's room on tip-toe. He was still sleeping the sleep of the blessed. She stopped a moment to look at him. Seemingly he had not stirred since Assia left him. Annette noiselessly explored Assia's mouldy cupboard ; the poverty of the clothes she found there excited her pity ; at least their relative cleanliness showed the tenacity of Assia's struggle to keep her chin above the mud. Annette knew all about that !

She went back and found Assia standing exactly where she had left her, leaning against the wall. A little pool had collected round her feet. Annette seized her by the shoulder and tore the clinging garments off her. Assia roused herself from her torpor and freed herself by a sudden movement of her shoulder and arm. But Annette gripped her again :

"Keep still ! . . . Raise your arm ! Come now, be quick !"

Assia growled :

"Such rubbish ! . . . Do you suppose that I haven't slept twenty times in rain like to-day's ?"

Without answering her, Annette spoke of Marc's sleep, and the rebellious body instantly kept still. In the speckled mirror on the opposite wall Annette saw the reflection of Assia's smile, to which her own responded. ✓ He was the child of both. The two women were at one. . . .

Annette's nimble fingers had stripped Assia from head to foot. A robust, supple body, not conforming to the æsthetic rules of beauty, made for the march and the battle, love and childbirth. Solidly jointed. The skin very dark, clear, and of close texture, with tinges of old gold ; it was glistening with water. . . . Annette dried her. Assia made no resistance.

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She had nothing left to hide. She had shown all, within and without. The two women talked as she stood naked :

" Why do you love Marc ? "

" I love him because I love him."

" I am asking you what you love him for ? "

Assia had understood quite well.

" What for ? How do I love him ? . . . I love him as one loves—because I am hungry. But one does not merely hunger for the body. That hunger can be cheated. I have cheated it more than once. But there is another hunger that cannot be cheated, and which does not cheat : I hunger for truth ; I hunger for cleanliness. And your son is true, he is clean in mind. He is clean, as you are. . . . Come ! I know what I am talking about. So do you. . . . Do you think one can be mistaken when one has struggled as I have for six years in the stagnant pool of these souls of to-day ? And when I meet one emerging, intact, how can I not pounce upon it ? "

" Perhaps my son is no more innocent, and but little more intact than you are. He has erred greatly. He will err again. To his misfortune, I made him with a troubled nature ; and if I have sufficient confidence in his fundamental loyalty, and in his will, to believe that some day he will achieve harmony, it will not be without danger, and it will not be to-morrow. . . . "

" I know it, I know it ! And what could I have to do with harmony ? Yes, he lacks it, thank God ! I have seen your son, naked as you see me, naked flesh and naked soul. Since I have spied upon him, and during his illness there is nothing that he has not revealed to me. . . . No, your lamb is not without blemish ! I know it. . . . If he were, I would not love him so much. I do not love (neither do you) white lambs bleating with a drop of milk hanging to their nose.✓ One isn't a man (you, I, he) if one has not confronted life in its burrow and left pieces of one's skin in it.✓ We must, we must pass through filth and thorns ! You have passed through, Marc has passed through. But he did not stay there. He is true. He is frank. He is true in hate. He is true in love ! There is too

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much wholesome bitterness in him for corruption to take hold on him. . . .”

“He is like you.”

Assia stopped short in her outburst. She stared in bewilderment at Annette, who stared at her. The two women looked at each other in silence. At last Annette opened her mouth. Assia made a movement to stop her speaking :

“I refuse,” said Annette, weighing her words with deliberation, “to separate him from you.”

Assia tried to speak. With her hand Annette bade her be silent :

“I know what I am risking. I risk on both sides. For I have two duties now. You, him—I accept them. I have confidence in you both. Remain together !”

Assia, paralysed with emotion, listened without understanding. . . . The meaning of the words filtered into her mind, drop by drop, frozen like stalactites. . . . She began to tremble, still naked, under the chemise which Annette, in motherly fashion, was putting over her head. . . . She bowed her head, turned to the wall, leant her forehead and arms against it, and, her face thus hidden, sobbed like a little girl.

XLI

Annette had made Assia lie down on the bed. Her teeth were chattering. Annette spread her coat over the girl’s bare legs. She said :

“You have caught cold. . . .”

“It is not from cold,” said Assia. “Please do let me stay near you like this a little longer !”

“Get into bed, then.”

Assia was holding her hands. Annette sat down beside her.

“Listen ! I am going away to-day. The man, the master, the friend, whom I helped, has just died suddenly. I must go back to my deserted post. I shall be away some weeks. I

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leave Marc to you, I leave you to Marc. Be on your guard, both of you ! You know what I mean, my child ? You do not misunderstand me ? I say : keep watch, remain together, but wait before you bind yourselves. Defend your mutual liberty, both of you. You defend his, if he cannot do it for himself ! Watch yourselves loyally. It will be a long time before you thoroughly understand, not each other, but yourselves. Take that time ! Be honest ! "

"I am and will be," said Assia, "I know what you mean. I have made no mistake. You, who know how to love, you must know that, since I love him, I am afraid of misleading him by a blunder on my own part. . . . But if he loves me and makes a mistake, shall I be strong enough to open his eyes ? . . . It would, perhaps, have been wiser to take him away."

"Suppose I took you at your word ?" said Annette.

"No, no ! . . . Don't. . . . I could not bear it. It is too late now."

She reflected a moment, was ashamed of her weakness, and added :

"But I will tell him everything. He shall know all."

Annette smiled, a melancholy smile.

"No, my child, I do not advise you to do that."

The other woman started ; she threw back the bedclothes, sat up and said, looking at Annette :

"You ! You advise me not to tell him the whole truth ?"

"Yes, it's strange, isn't it ? In a mother . . ."

"In you."

"Thank you. Yes, I think I am true, and have always been so, especially when the truth was inconvenient. That is what gives me the right to advise you to-day. You want to tell Marc all that you have been ?"

"All that I am," said Assia.

"All that you are ? Or have you passed through it like the mud of the roads, with feet that are now washed clean ? . . . But so be it ! I also remember the mud through which my

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feet have passed. I hold myself responsible for the woman I was. And I do not like those who, when the unwelcome image of their former self rises up, say : 'I know not the man !' But that you know him is your own affair. You are not bound to make him known to others."

"No, not to others," said Assia. "But to him."

"That might be," said Annette, with a subtle smile of rather bitter irony, "that might be if, by telling him, you bravely took the risk of driving him from you ! But if he loves you, as you are sure he does (too sure), you would not drive him from you, you would only wound him ; and that wound, bitter enough no doubt, would be one bond the more to sink into his flesh. He will not love you less, he will say, 'I forget everything.' He will forget nothing. In a year, two years, ten years, the wound will re-open and become purulent. When you, you have forgotten who that woman was, who, worn out with sorrow, and distraught, in the midst of death gave herself in the dark, so as to cling in her fall to some living body, no matter whose, which would keep her hanging on to life—he, our Marc, will see her with his night-bird's eyes that love borrows from jealousy, and he will force you to see her again in those eyes. He will condemn you to remain bound for life to that flesh of the past which you will have cast off—which we all cast off—like an old dress. They would have us keep, rotting under our skin, our old souls which, thank God ! we have let fall as we gradually renew ourselves. Men are unable to understand, my child, that strength which is in us, which is our duty, of eternal rejuvenation."

Her voice, unraised, had taken on an accent of serene bitterness. Assia watched her in astonished silence. Annette, who was not looking at her, and who for a few moments, had been speaking, not for another but for herself, remembered the existence of the other woman, who was gazing at her and, turning to her, exchanged an understanding smile.

"*La donna è mobile . . .*' that is what they say of us. That is what they would say if they had heard me. They do

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not understand that in a true woman the true does not vary. Nothing that we have lived through is lost if it has nourished our life ; it is part of our blood ; and we evacuate only what is useless and impure. . . .”

Assia said :

“ I did not expect to find an ally.”

“ I have never found one,” said Annette. “ That is why I pity those who have none.”

“ Then be one to me ! I will not take advantage of it. And I beg you to help me, never against Marc, but for him. Since you do not wish me to tell him everything—I feel that you are right, but I cannot answer for my silence !—I commit every-thing that weighs upon me into your hands. I have unburdened myself of the worst of it to-day ; but there is still more : you shall have it all. You will be free to use it against me for your son, whenever you think proper. I will not contradict you.”

Annette had a gleam of mischief.

“ Very well ! Look out for yourself ! Now I have a hold on you.”

“ Hold me ! I want you to. I make you my judge. It is my only way of repaying you for all I have received from you. . . .”

“ What ? ”

“ Don’t pretend you don’t know ! You know. . . . No one has ever given me what you have given me. . . . Not love : I have had that, I have it, and I shall have it. . . . Much more :—confidence. You have had faith in me. Do you know the result ? You have given it back to me—if I ever had it. I have faith now, faith in myself. Thank you ! I rise from the dead. . . .”

She got out of bed, fell upon her knees and impetuously kissed Annette’s knees.

“ And I pledge myself,” she said, “ to refuse to marry Marc, to force him to remain free, free as myself.”

Annette, taking her under the arms, lifted her up, with an ironical smile.

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"He promises in vain who does not know what he can perform. . . ."

She kissed her, felt her thighs and shoulders, and said :

"Your skin is quite dry now. . . . Dress yourself. He is waiting for us."

XLII

Assia had quite made up her mind not to marry Marc. It was not a question of loyalty to Annette. It was a fixed determination, a refusal of her nature to submit to double harness. . . . "I love, I love you, I would give you my life and my death to-day; but I do not give you my to-morrow. I cannot be bound down! . . ."

Annette, who had not Assia's reasons for deluding herself, knew better how matters stood, and what the issue would be.

The two lovers mutually reiterating : "We love each other, and remain free"—did everything in their power to be the contrary. They persisted in trying to bind themselves and each other.

Annette had returned after spending three weeks in London for the inquest. Timon on the way from London to Brussels had mysteriously disappeared, fallen from his aeroplane: murder or suicide? An unknown hand had stolen all the papers which might have thrown some light on the circumstances. During those weeks Annette had been taken up by her duty to the dead man, clearing up the ruins, and her remorse—would he have died if she had not left him alone? Gnawed by these thoughts, but keeping them entirely to herself, she had returned to Paris, and found Marc and Assia caught in the net of passion which day by day had spun its web around them. And now, what could she do? Separate them? It was much too late! Warn them of the dangers? They knew them. And what she herself knew—what she was, perhaps, the only one who knew—about the two children—

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caught her also in their net. This Assia, who in her unbridled confessions had, like a flood, laid everything bare before her—not only the worst, but the good, the rare, the most secret, that which it costs a proud woman most to reveal—had also flooded her heart. She had seen at a glance, and appreciated like a connoisseur, the seedling in its youthful nudity, and the harsh discipline Assia had had the energy to impose upon herself during her years of exile in Paris; her solitude and misery accepted without compromise, her intractable need of truth, that loyalty of mind towards oneself—nothing could be more appreciated by Annette: compared with this dangerous virtue, “purity”, in the bourgeois sense was secondary in her eyes. Though Assia had been, and might again, be led astray by passion, these lapses were but gusts of wind ruffling the surface, they did not touch the essential: the sure and sincere integrity of soul. Annette passed the sponge over them. . . . (But she knew that her son would never do so. And that was one of the dangers. . . .)

Dangers were, certainly, not lacking; they abounded, and they were not all on one side. Marc was dangerous too—in a different fashion from Assia. Annette would not have cared to trust him with a raw, inexperienced young girl (as Assia said, but without conviction). He lacked restraint and balance; he lacked prudence and justice; he lacked kindness and real humanity. Annette saw all this. She judged her son. He was too young and too scarred by too incomplete and violent precocious experience. He might grow wiser and really kind later on, much later on, at forty; then he might perhaps be capable of understanding and guiding a young woman. At present they would mutually drive each other mad, make each other suffer, and risk mutual destruction. Yet it was not good for Marc to be alone. Such solitude in the bitter struggle against a poisonous environment, if too prolonged, was against nature, and his young strength undermined, as it was, could no longer cope with it. He needed a helpmate, a companion made virile by the hand-to-hand struggle with life, an elder

sister, with a little of the mother and brother, who would know how to bind up his wounds and, if need were, how to fight by his side. Could Assia be all this? She could. But would she know how? There were reasons for doubting it. And why expect from a young woman an unselfishness in love, which the man does not possess, and which passion leads astray? (For passion is the opposite of unselfishness; it disposes of the other as of itself.) Age alone and longsuffering experience can teach it to those who are capable of learning. Well then, why should these two not learn it? Annette had confidence in her son. And the other? Why not? Assia had won the right to her confidence. Even (and above all) by confiding to her that which, by its very nature, was most likely to estrange her. The risks were at least open—they were naked—they were not dressed up with small virtues as in the case of so many women and girls, with whom one cannot tell what is hidden under the still waters. And the risks were counterbalanced by other virtues, more robust, and frank and open like the risks. Risk for risk, Annette knew well which she would choose if she were Marc. Therefore she knew what choice to expect from him. It would be bad faith on her part to reproach him for it. Though the mother wished to save her son from the torments she foresaw, she could not save him from his tormented soul and the destiny it had prepared for him. . . . Go, my children, to your fate! It was useless to try and bar the way; it was wiser and more effective to hold out her hand to him, to appeal to his noblest powers, to have faith in him and say: "I believe in you. My faith binds you."

And so when Assia, brusque and troubled, defying her, while she sought her consent or pardon, came to announce—what Annette had been expecting for some weeks:

"I take back my word. . . . No! I take nothing back; I promised nothing. . . . I want your son. He wants me. We are getting married." She smiled and made no answer, looking straight into Assia's eyes. While waiting for her to speak Assia spoke herself, to break open the door of silence, which

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made her uneasy. She said that they had made up their minds, that no objection could be put forward that she did not know already, that it was clear as daylight to her that their union would not be untroubled, that they would hurt each other, that she would do him harm. . . . "Yes, it's possible. It's even certain. . . ." (But she could not do otherwise. It was written. . . . With her Fate always intervened as a last resource when her personal will to resist had exhausted its violence.) And now she came and announced it to Annette ; she left her free to raise obstacles, because she knew that Annette had no further power to do so. . . .

"And now why don't you speak ? You say nothing ; you only look at me. Come ! say something !"

"After all you have said, what need have you of my opinion ? You want Marc. Marc wants you. What more do you want ?"

"I want you. You, to say 'Yes !'"

"If I were to say no it would make no difference to you. You have not troubled to disguise it. My 'No' would only make you run yourselves further on to the hook. You have swallowed the hook. There is nothing to be done, my poor gudgeons ! You have only got to digest the bait. It is made up just as much of what separates as of what draws you together—of your different natures, your two races (they are part of the attraction) : you will have time to feel their bones scratching your throat ! It would perhaps have been wiser not to hook your little bowels to their bait. What need was there for you to get married ? You would have loved each other all the better without. . . . But since it's done, it's done ; it cannot be undone without tearing the little bowels ; and mine would bleed too. All I could say to you, or nothing, it's the same. So, my children, love each other well ! In your own fashion, and not in mine. I know that you are, both of you, better than your deeds. Each of you separately is weak, weak. . . . Try to make your two weaknesses one strength !

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I entrust you to my son. I entrust my son to you, my daughter."

Assia pressed her mouth to Annette's shoulder, and could find nothing to say but :

"*Mamotchka.* . . ."

They stood still there together cheek to cheek. Assia, with her extreme lucidity and her loyalty of intellectual control (inoperative against the assaults of her nature), turned over in her mind what Annette had just said ; and she admitted that it was true, that it was madness that she who regarded marriage as a superannuated institution, should wish to come under its yoke in order to bind herself. Even if marriage, instead of being, as henceforth, a door with no latch, which divorce opens at will, if it had been, as of yore, a cage with no exit, I think that both of them, she and Marc, would have preferred it ! There are hours of love when we aspire to perpetual imprisonment. We say to the day : " You shall not pass. . . ." It is madness to try to force nature. ✓ . .

Annette knew it. She who felt Assia's temple throbbing against her chin, she heard, she understood what was going on behind that forehead. In her acquiescence in what she could not have prevented, there entered—besides a certain "*Amor fati*" which was the fruit of age, the acceptance of the great currents which sweep you away, and escape you, by escaping the understanding—there crept in a mysterious apperception of Marc's destiny. This woman, whose intimacy with Timon had enlightened her upon social reality and the imminence of the great Conflict, saw darkly her son's place marked, in the forefront of the battle—on the other side. She had an unformulated presentiment of it, long before Marc and Assia became clearly aware of it (they were too taken up by their passion !) she outstripped them, and she waited with a dim consciousness, she waited till from their union that destiny should be made clear. She felt that this union, whatever its domestic trials and failures might be, was in the right line of their forward march. Trials and failures be it ! March on !

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XLIII

✓The two lovers looked at each other, and their looks were like the basin of a fountain which received the jetting water. Each had made a void to receive the other's stream. And drowned in joy each felt full of the other's being. To find themselves, they clasped each other. They said :

"I have you ! You have me ! Don't give me back ! I don't give you back. . . . Ah ! how good it is to have exchanged ! And how I love life, now that life is your life. I have got it ! How well I will keep it !

These two children who, till now, had only had themselves to save ! . . . And it was no small thing ! With what struggles and at what cost they had succeeded in snatching it from the destruction of this dying world ! . . . But was it worth while to fight so hard, to bear so much, such renunciations, so many insults, such shame, and to begin again every day for that ego alone, that destitute, soiled, burning, broken, weary ego, which possesses you, obsesses you, and that you do not love ? . . . Ah ! now, what a more exalting, more intoxicating feeling, what an afflux of blood, now when one says to oneself : "Save the other ! . . . He is mine. . . ." Is he mine, or am I his ? Have I annexed him, or is it he ? Is this not some trick of passion, that does not confess its egoism ? In any case, it is an extended egoism, a doubled individuality. The gate lies open to the sea. But it opens from the end of the fjord. The barque of love must pass through the gate. . . .

And the barque of love is not tempted to go forth. The great winds have fallen suddenly in the sheltered inlet of the fjord. The barque rides motionless in its golden pool.

Whence shall salvation come ? From what unexpected squall, the whirlwind of which has for centre the very heart of love ? Must the struggle flame up again in the breast of the pair ? Must hate blow on love, that love may recover itself, that the sails may swell, and the prow drive its plough-

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share into the sea? Come forth, stern rider, who bestrideth life, and plough its sides with thy spur. Plough the sides of these children! The world will not advance except beneath the spur. We must march on. If you stop, you fall. . . You shall not fall! I will raise you up by sorrow.

✓A world in pain! At one and the same hour, nations are dying of oppression and misery. The great famine has just devoured the peoples of the Volga. The axes and fasces of the black lictors are raised above Rome. The prisons of Hungary and the Balkans stifle the cries of the tortured. The ancient homes of Liberty—France, England, America—suffer her to be violated, and parley with the violators. Germany has assassinated her "precursors". And in the birch wood near Moscow the clear eye of Lenin grows dim, his consciousness sinks down. The Revolution has lost its pilot. Darkness seems to be closing in on Europe.

Of what account is the destiny of two children—their joys and sorrows—these two drops of water merged in one—in this vast sea? . . . Lend your ear! In them you will hear the roaring of the sea. All the sea is in each drop. All its storms are repercussed therein. Ah! if each drop but knew, would but understand! . . . Come, bend your head! Lay your ear to the dripping shell that I have picked up on the shore!

In it a world is weeping. A world is dying.

But in it, likewise, I hear already the crying of the child. ✓

September, 1932.

Marvellous

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